



## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE POLITICAL STRUGGLES OF THE *ULAMA* OF *DAR-UL-ULOOM* DEOBAND: IDENTIFYING AND OPERATIONALIZING THE TRADITIONALIST APPROACH TO POLITICS

Myra Hamid, Master of Arts, 2005

Thesis Directed By: Professor James Glass  
Department of Government and Politics

This paper uses the example of the political struggles of the religious scholars (*ulama*) of *Dar-ul-Uloom* Deoband, a highly influential Islamic seminary founded in North India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the wake of Muslim defeat in the Mutiny of 1857 against the British, to identify the salient features of the traditionalist approach to politics and examine how this approach can be operationalized. The paper compares the traditionalist orientation to politics, which the school at Deoband and the movement that emerged from there came to represent, with modernist and fundamentalist/Islamist approaches. It proposes that the understudied but extremely important traditionalist paradigm provides the basis for more creative, balanced, fruitful, and Islamically authentic political engagement than either of the two opposing trends popular in the Muslim world today.

THE POLITICAL STRUGGLES OF THE *ULAMA* OF *DAR-UL-ULOOM*  
DEOBAND:  
IDENTIFYING AND OPERATIONALIZING THE TRADITIONALIST  
APPROACH TO POLITICS

By

Myra Hamid

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Master of Arts  
2005

Examining Committee

Professor James Glass, Chair

Professor Fred Alford

Professor Jillian Schwedler

UMI Number: 1431544

UMI<sup>®</sup>

---

UMI Microform 1431544

Copyright 2006 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.  
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against  
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

---

ProQuest Information and Learning Company  
300 North Zeeb Road  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
Chapter One THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE INDIAN <i>ULAMA</i>	
Under the Mughals.....	8
Declining Mughal Rule and the Rise of British Power.....	11
The Response of the <i>Ulama</i> .....	13
Summary.....	15
Chapter Two <i>DAR-UL-ULOOM</i> DEOBAND: A BASTION OF TRADITIONAL ISLAM	
A Different Kind of <i>Madrassah</i> .....	17
Traditionalism, Modernism, and Islamism.....	21
Legal and Spiritual Tradition of <i>Dar-ul-Uloom</i> Deoband.....	28
Summary.....	36
Chapter Three POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT OF THE <i>ULAMA</i> OF DEOBAND	
Participation in the Mutiny of 1857.....	39
Post-Mutiny Political Activism.....	41
The Other Deobandi Perspective.....	48
Summary.....	51
Chapter Four SALIENT FEATURES OF TRADITIONALIST POLITICAL THOUGHT	
Politics as the Means to Non-Political Ends.....	54
Politics as <i>Ijtihad</i> .....	61
The Spiritual Dimension of Politics.....	69
Summary.....	76
CONCLUSION.....	79
GLOSSARY.....	86
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	89

## INTRODUCTION

*Islam kay iss markaz say huwi taqdees ayan azaadi ki  
Iss baam-e-haram say goonji hae so bar azaan azaadi ki*

From this center of Islam the sanctity of freedom was made manifest  
From this minaret of the Sacred Mosque the call to freedom was proclaimed a  
hundred times

Quoted above is a verse from the official school anthem of the *Dar-ul-Uloom* (House of Knowledge), Deoband, established in the Northern part of India 10 years after the crushing defeat suffered by the natives of the Indian sub-continent at the hands of their British colonizers in what came to be known as the Mutiny of 1857. Arriving in India as merchants under the auspices of the British East India Company first in 1608, the British had been consolidating their control over the vast and varied territories of the Indian subcontinent for over a century, but their success in meeting the challenge posed to their growing authority in 1857 firmly established them as the imperial power in India. In the years that followed, the East India Company was abolished as was the façade of continuing Muslim Mughal rule, and the administration of India became the direct responsibility of the Crown. Natives were punished for their rebelliousness; Muslims bore the brunt of British reprisal, and

ensuing British reform measures were seen as formidable threats to the preservation of their culture and religious identity.

Their defeat at the hands of the British was a rude awakening for the Muslims of India, and spurred several simultaneous reform and revival movements, each aimed at redressing what its leaders considered to be the causes of Muslim decline. One such movement, known as the Aligarh Movement, was founded by the influential modernist Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, who believed that Muslim revival could be achieved only by assimilating Western culture, acquiring a Western education, and reinterpreting Islam based upon reason as understood in modern Western philosophy—a modernized, secularized version of Islam that would be in conformity with modern science and notions of progress<sup>1</sup>. Another movement, known as the *Ahl-e-Hadith*, developed as the South-Asian version of the Wahabi movement in Saudi Arabia, its followers consisting mostly of well-educated Muslims who rejected the Islamic jurisprudential tradition as well as institutionalized Sufism in favor of a more literalist interpretation to the Quran and *hadith* (sayings of Prophet Muhammad).

The *madrassah* (Islamic seminary) at Deoband, and the movement associated with it, was founded by a group of *ulama* (sing. *alim*), traditional Islamic scholars, who were prompted by Muslim defeat at the hands of the British to also consider deeply the causes of Muslim failure and decline. While it is commonly believed that its founders participated actively in the Mutiny of 1857, and the more radical of its students alleged that the purpose of the institution was to train revolutionaries, the *ulama* of Deoband were primarily committed to the preservation, revival, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Fuad S. Naeem, *A Traditional Islamic Response to the Rise of Modernism, in Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, edited by Joseph E. B. Lumbard, p.

dissemination of traditional Islamic knowledge. They focused on nurturing the inward faith and reforming the outward practice of Indian Muslims according to traditional Islamic teachings, resisting the threat of foreign influence on the one hand and modernist and puritanical reform movements on the other, while also purging the practice of the religion of reprehensible innovations.

While the institution maintained throughout an apolitical official posture and focused on the dissemination of knowledge regarding correct belief and practice, some of its leading *ulama* found themselves deeply involved with the most important political issues of the day— resistance against British rule in India, preventing the abolition of the Muslim Ottoman Caliphate in Turkey in the wake of World War I, and later, partition of India and creation of the separate nation-state of Pakistan for the Muslims of the sub-continent. At times, this brought them into direct confrontation with the British authorities and, more significantly, often entered them into conflict with each other. Though very few of their writings are dedicated to detailed explications of their understanding of Islamic political doctrine, the approach that the *ulama* took to politics, the relative enthusiasm with which they participated in it, their stances vis-à-vis each other, the justifications for their respective positions, and the means through which they made their relative positions known, provide invaluable insights into their political thought.

The political ideas of the *ulama* of Deoband are important because of the impact they had on the political scene at the time and because of their continuing influence on contemporary political movements in South Asia. However, they are also crucial for students of Islamic political thought because they offer insights into

the traditionalist approach to politics, the institution at Deoband having been established as a bastion of traditional Islam in the sub-continent, its *ulama* committed to safeguarding traditional Islamic teachings and methodology in the face of challenges from modernist and fundamentalist elements.

While the modernist and fundamentalist approaches to politics have gained much attention in the West in recent years, the same is not true for the traditionalist approach. Western scholarship has produced extensive literature on modernism in the Islamic world, as well as on their opponents in fundamentalist groups, but has not sufficiently studied the vast majority of Muslim intellectuals and scholars who produced work in continuity with traditional Islamic ideas and methods. This may be in part because advocacy by modernist Muslims of the same principles, processes, and institutions that the Western world wishes to see implemented in Muslim countries makes the promotion of the modernist approach advantageous to the Western agenda. On the other hand, not only do fundamentalists and Islamists attract attention to themselves in dramatic, often heinous, ways, they are also widely discussed, and denounced, as a foil to the Western/modernist approach.

Traditional *ulama* have themselves for the most part shied away from politics, unwilling to participate in the corrupt and corrupting political systems existing in most Muslim countries so as not to lend credence to them and fearing that even minor successes in the existing framework would require too many compromises on adherence to the Sacred Law. On the other hand, active opposition to the existing order is considered either illegitimate from the Islamic perspective, given that classical jurists considered only a very high degree of excesses by incumbent rulers as

justifying the creation of public unrest against them, or at best a futile exercise that could, in fact, be counter-productive. The traditional *ulama*, such as the *ulama* of Deoband, have instead preferred to focus on the task of educating and training the minds and hearts of believers in the teachings of the religion as a way to bring about change in the status quo. They have, as a result neither exerted themselves to produce scholarly works on politics, most of the recent literature on Islam and politics being produced either by Islamists or modernists, nor have they been very active in advocating their positions on different political issues. Their wariness, as we will see, is in fact a function of their very approach to politics.

As a result of this mutual lack of interest in developing and promoting traditionalist political thought, only the modernist and Islamist/fundamentalist approaches have gained popularity, and notoriety, as political “ideologies” emerging from the Muslim world. Both offer formulas aimed at correcting the political and social problems ailing the Muslim world. While modernists point to the success of their proposed solutions in the non-Muslim world as evidence for their assertions, Islamists tout the example of the earliest community of Muslims established by Prophet Muhammad in Medina as the Kingdom of God on Earth that will result from the successful implementation of their proposals. The push for their respective agendas enters modernists and Islamists/fundamentalists into a passionate struggle with each other, both considering the proposals of the other mutually exclusive to their own. It is this drama that the world often witnesses.

However, I contend that a third alternative, the one offered by the traditionalist *ulama* offers a much more balanced approach to politics; one more

firmly rooted in the letter and spirit of the original sources of the religion for those who care about authenticity than either the modernist or fundamentalist approaches, and one more organically linked to the history of Islamic civilization. Furthermore, while it has often been assumed that the traditional *ulama* have become utterly redundant, fixed in a historically remote time and completely removed from the concerns of the day, and therefore of little interest to anyone seriously interested in solving the problems of contemporary Muslim societies, the very course of the development of their ideas in history is testimony to the opposite. Theirs has been an approach that engages new challenges while consciously maintaining an incontrovertible link with the past in a systematic, even scientific, manner, and provides a more dynamic alternative to modernist and fundamentalist political thought. While it is the modernists and Islamists/fundamentalists that in pushing for the implementation of particular forms and specific strategies are limiting the possibility of growth and change, the traditionalist approach offers not a particular model of political organization and behavior but a methodology and a set of considerations that allows for variation and change across time and space and in the face of changing circumstances. It puts forward a way to merge the seemingly irreconcilable claims of modernist and fundamentalist political thinkers and activists to flexibility and pragmatism on the one hand, and ageless and unalterable principles on the other, responsiveness to changing needs and circumstances on the one hand and alleged commitment to a paradigmatic past on the other.

The engagement in politics of the *ulama* of *Dar-ul-Uloom* Deoband provides insight not only into the broad themes in the traditionalist approach to politics, but

also provides an example of the dynamism of the traditional approach and its relevance as a political philosophy for the Muslim world in contemporary times. While there are many contending claims to Islamic political doctrine, with trends as widely divergent as modernism and fundamentalism claiming to most faithfully embody the spirit of Prophet Muhammad's teachings pertaining to politics, the traditionalist framework within which the *ulama* of *Dar-ul-Uloom* Deoband formulated their political positions constitutes a relatively under-studied but particularly authoritative approach, if degree of connectedness to the past is a compelling measure of authenticity. Though its systematic academic study has been neglected by political scientists, being seen as more appropriately belonging to the discipline of religious studies, understanding the traditionalist model of politics could suggest solutions to root problems plaguing the practice of politics in the Muslim World today.

Chapter 1 of this study describes the changing role of the *ulama* of the Indian sub-continent in the decades preceding the creation of *Dar-ul-Uloom* Deoband, under the Mughals and with the consolidation of British imperial power in India. Chapter 2 proceeds to describe the innovative structure of the *madrasah*, its general orientation as compared with other important contemporary trends within Islamic thought, and its particular legal and spiritual commitments within that orientation. Chapter 3 presents an account of the involvement in politics of the more politically engaged of its *ulama*, while Chapter 4 draws out the theoretical implications of this engagement for traditionalist Islamic political thought.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE INDIAN *ULAMA*

#### UNDER THE MUGHALS

Mughal rule was established in the Indian sub-continent by Babar, the great-grandson of the Central Asian Mongol leader Taimur (Tamerlane), when he defeated Ibrahim Lodhi, the last of the Delhi Sultans, in the First Battle of Panipat in 1526. The empire continued to expand under Babar's descendents, and rule over it was consolidated, until the death of the Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, after which it entered a period of slow and steady decline that ended 150 years later when the British abolished Mughal rule and exiled the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, to Burma. Though the majority of the population of India was Hindu, its Mughal rulers were Muslims of varying commitments, from the heretical Akbar, founder of a new religion, to the ultra-orthodox Aurangzeb Alamgir. However, in the period of political stability under the Mughals from the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the decline of Muslim power in India in the 18<sup>th</sup>, men of religious knowledge consistently occupied a very important position.

Men of learning who played an important political role during Mughal rule included the *ulama* who were trained in Persian and Arabic, and in two broad categories of academic disciplines, the *manqulat* or 'transcribed' subjects of Quran and *hadith*, and the *ma'qulat* or 'rational' sciences ranging from Arabic grammar and

rhetoric to logic, mathematics, philosophy, theology and, above all, books of Islamic law and jurisprudence,<sup>2</sup> and were the acknowledged experts in the external dictates of the *Shari'a*. Also influential were Sufi masters whose esoteric knowledge was based on a direct experience with the Divine and who guided their disciples in meeting the demands of the *Shari'a* pertaining to their inner lives. Usually, both outward and inward knowledge of the religion were combined in one person, and a man came to be known as *alim* or Sufi according to which kind of knowledge he emphasized.

Being educated as an *alim* in this period was a sure route to respectability, and often to prestige and influence. The Muslim courts prided themselves on their cultural attainments, among which religious learning held an important position, and so “the intellectuals among them were sought out as adornments to the various entourages of the nobility.”<sup>3</sup> The *ulama* were responsible for the education of the nobility; they staffed various levels of the judiciary, and oversaw the charitable establishment of the empire. The leading members of the *ulama* served in capacities that ranged from prayer leaders in town mosques to the most influential of advisors and courtiers. *Ulama* and Sufi masters were influential not only in the official capacities that they served, but also wielded an independent moral authority, to which not just courtiers but even kings submitted, especially as disciples.

There were several reasons for the attachment of religious scholars to the royal courts and the nobility. Surely, advancement of their careers and financial security for themselves and their families were considerations that led to acceptance of formal appointments, even at the expense of religious principles, as the rulers were

---

<sup>2</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, p. 19

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19

prone to patronizing the more compliant *ulama*. A man could hence choose to become an *alim* not only because of commitment to his religious heritage but because it offered lucrative career prospects. However, many *ulama* associated themselves with the state in order to influence its decision-makers, even if this meant compromising on certain minor issues in order to achieve major compliances with the religious code.

An example of this sort of attachment is in the career of *Shaikh*<sup>4</sup> Ahmed Sirhindi (1564 to 1624), a prominent scholar and Sufi who frequented the court and cultivated relations with eminent nobles, many of whom became his disciples. He carried on extensive correspondence with political leaders, including the king, but fell in disfavor with the Emperor Jehangir, who found some of his remarks offensive. After being jailed for a year, however, he found favor again and became the recipient of royal patronage. *Shaikh* Ahmed Sirhindi sought to gain an audience for his intellectual and religious views among the powers that be, and towards this end he lent prestige and dignity to patrons who furthered his concerns.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time that *ulama* lent their support to rulers who maintained order and provided a stable framework for the continuation of Muslim social and religious life, tolerating a certain level of deviance from divine law in view of the greater good that was attained by their counsel, they were also key figures in reform, even revolutionary, movements if the deviation was seen to go beyond tolerable limits. The same *Shaikh* Ahmed Sirhindi, for example, who received patronage from Emperor Jehangir and was able to influence him considerably, led a rigorous campaign against

---

<sup>4</sup> The title *Shaikh* refers to Spiritual Master

<sup>5</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, p. 22

Jehangir's father Akbar when Akbar claimed to have founded a new religion which combined the salient features of several different religions. It seems as if *Shaikh* Ahmed Sirhindi's decision to work within or outside the system depended on an understanding of what was the most effective means to safeguard Islam in the sub-continent at any given time, a tactical decision which recurs in the reform movements of later *ulama* and Sufi masters, including the personalities associated with Deoband over two centuries later.

### DECLINING MUGHAL RULE AND THE RISE OF BRITISH POWER

With the death of Aurangzeb, the last of the 'Great Mughals' in 1707, the breakup of the empire began. As the Mughal empire weakened, British control extended and gathered strength; by 1803 they had taken on the role of protectors of the now titular Mughal king. As they consolidated their rule, the British introduced policies that had a deep impact on many aspects of Muslim life, including the role of the *ulama*.

One of the most profound changes was in the administration of law. Muslim law, like the law of other communities, was codified and frozen. Traditionally, Islamic courts had relied upon officials known as *muftis*, who specialized in interpreting Islamic law and issuing edicts (*fatwas*) on a case by case basis, and *qadis*, or judges who decided in accordance with these *fatwas*. It was precisely this flexibility and responsiveness to context that perturbed the British, and judicial discretion was seen by them as nothing more than sheer arbitrariness. In their search for a rationalized, fixed and authoritative code, they came to recognize only a small

body of classical legal texts as being the sole and unchanging repository of Muslim law.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, important issues such as the law of evidence and offenses against the state were based not on Islamic legal sources but on British law.<sup>7</sup> The resulting “Anglo-Muhammadan law” was decidedly not the *ulama*’s legal tradition but a hybrid of certain legal classics and English common law and was increasingly administered by British officials. Through this development, the British were able to avoid their dependence on local *ulama* who were as a result deprived of the most distinctive aspect of their vocation, the interpretation of law, and the alleged arbitrariness of the scholars’ methodology was restrained. While *muftis* and *qadis* were initially retained as advisors, their positions were completely abolished by 1864.<sup>8</sup>

The decline of the royal courts meant a blow to the patronage enjoyed by religious scholars and their institutions of learning. Grants to *madrassahs* became smaller and increasingly unreliable, and existing endowments were confiscated by the new British rulers.<sup>9</sup> *Ulama* now had to seek independent sources of funding for their institutions.

The Mutiny of 1857, referred to by the locals as the War of Independence, challenged the hold of the British on the subcontinent. However, once decisively suppressed, it served to further entrench British control in India, with the ailing Mughal emperor exiled in disgrace to Burma, Mughal rule abolished, and India brought directly under the British Crown. Muslims were disproportionately blamed

---

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, p. 23

<sup>7</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, p. 49

<sup>8</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, p. 25

<sup>9</sup> M. Burhanuddin Qasmi, *Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband, A Historic Struggle against British Tyranny*, p. 14

for their role in the Mutiny for the British believed that the hostility of the Muslims was rooted in their loss of political power, while the Hindus had fought from economic grievances, the former motive considered more threatening than the latter. British revenge was extensive in the countryside, but it was worse in the capital Delhi; the mosques of the city were occupied and *madrassahs* were razed<sup>10</sup>

### THE RESPONSE OF THE ULAMA

The Mutiny of 1857 was crucial in shaping the consciousness and defining the future role for the *ulama* of the sub-continent. For one, it dispelled any illusions of continuing Muslim power, and brought into focus the weakness of the Muslims of India. The *ulama* believed that this weakness was the result of spiritual decline and an abandonment of the Islamic code of life—a departure from both the form and spirit of the *Shari'a*<sup>11</sup>. Ensuing reform efforts aimed at improving the Islamic quality of individual lives, and creating a community both observant of detailed religious law and committed to spiritual progress. It is significant that the *ulama* did not resort to blaming the enemy for the failure suffered by Muslims, but were rather introspective, identifying the causes of weakness to lie within. Whereas previously religious knowledge had been the concern of a limited elite, there was now to take place a popularizing of religious education, so that Muslims of all backgrounds and classes of society may be able to know and live their lives in accordance with the requirements of their religion.

---

<sup>10</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, p 84-85

<sup>11</sup> *Shari'a* is usually translated as Islamic law. However, it includes the entire code governing private and public aspects of Muslim life, including, but not limited to, acts of worship, good manners, interpersonal relationships, business dealings, conduct of the state, etc. A more detailed explanation of *Shari'a* follows.

A recognition of the weakness of the Muslims before their new foreign masters also sobered the *ulama*, as they by and large went out of their way to avoid offense to, and conflict with, the new rulers. They tended to leave the political and cultural capital Delhi, which had suffered the brunt of the revenge of the British, and moved to smaller towns which were less touched by British presence, and where they were less likely to be subject to interference by the new rulers. These towns now became the centers for the preservation of Muslim cultural and religious life. Barbara Metcalf points out:

“The *ulama* in Muslim history have tended to oscillate between participation in the state and the exercise of independently based local leadership. The north Indian *ulama*, in choosing the latter style, thus adopted a well-known strategy with historical precedent. Again echoing precedent, they made the *madrassah* the institutional basis of their work.”<sup>12</sup>

However, while most *ulama* and their institutions did not engage in overt political activity, the goal of freeing India from foreign domination formed the background of the educational endeavors of the community of scholars, and subtle means were adopted to create a political consciousness among followers and to disseminate their political views among the Muslim population of the sub-continent.

With Islamic law transformed into Anglo-Muhammadan law and dispensed by British court officials rather than *muftis* and *qadis*, *fatwas* were now issued directly by *ulama* to believers for their guidance. While they were no longer backed by the coercive power of courts, nor could they affect the workings of the state, they were to become a vehicle for disseminating ever more detailed guidance on everyday concerns to Muslims seeking to preserve their religious practice and identity under

---

<sup>12</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, p. 87-88

alien rule. They took on a new importance given the uncertainty of the times, and established the *ulama* as the authoritative guides in those changing circumstances.<sup>13</sup>

Muhammad Qasim Zaman notes:

“Indeed, in colonial India, this function (of *muftis*) registered certain important changes: from the late nineteenth century, *fatwas* were often given on the authority of a particular *madrasa*, such as the *madrasa* of Deoband, rather than on that of a single jurisconsult; *fatwas* were issued in larger numbers than had been the case earlier; and the technology of print enabled the *madrasas* to disseminate their *fatwas* more widely and, in many cases, to begin publishing influential compilations of them.”<sup>14</sup>

## SUMMARY

During the Mughal era, men of religious knowledge, the *ulama* and *mashaikh*,<sup>15</sup> wielded political influence on the ruling elite as their educators and in official capacities, and the latter in particular held informal clout as the spiritual guides of members of the aristocracy and even princes and kings. Though attachment to the state was the most profitable career option for religious scholars, they were also able to influence the ruler to govern according to the teachings of Islam, and this was the primary objective of association with the establishment for many of them. However, as legal experts and moral authorities they were also able to inspire and direct opposition movements against rulers who strayed too much from the revealed code, the choice of influencing the status quo from within or attacking it from without depending on a consideration of the course of action that under the circumstances would best serve the interests of the religion and of the Muslims of the sub-continent.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 50

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, p. 25

<sup>15</sup> Plural of *Shaikh*, a Sufi master

With the rise of British power and the decline of Mughal courts, the *ulama* lost their influence on the establishment both in their formal and informal capacities, and the new rulers excluded them from their traditional role in the interpretation and administration of law. Fearing that being governed by a legal code not rooted firmly in the *Shari'a* and administered by non-Muslims would result in misguidance of the Muslims, the *ulama* resorted to issuing more profusely than ever before religious edicts called *fatwas* to disseminate instruction in the *Shari'a*. These were received readily, indeed demanded, by ordinary Muslims who turned to the *ulama* and *mashaikh* for guidance in these confusing times. The *fatwas* also served as the major instrument in the reform efforts of the *ulama*, who identified a departure from both the letter and spirit of the *Shari'a* as the cause of Muslim decline and used *fatwas* to correct the beliefs and practices of the masses. As we will see in the chapters to come, *fatwas* were also used to guide the political views and actions of the Muslims, and became the primary means through which the *ulama* exerted political influence.

## CHAPTER TWO

### DAR-UL-ULOOM DEOBAND: A BASTION OF TRADITIONAL ISLAM

#### A DIFFERENT KIND OF MADRASSAH

The *madrassah* at Deoband was established by *Maulana*<sup>16</sup> Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, *Maulana* Qasim Nanautvi, and others, under the guidance of their spiritual mentor, *Haji*<sup>17</sup> Imdadullah Makki, in the town of Deoband in Northern India in 1867. Its modest beginnings were under a pomegranate tree in the compound of an old mosque, with one teacher and one student. However, from its very inception the school was unlike earlier *madrassahs*, replacing the informal pattern of education that the scene under the pomegranate tree conjures up, with the British bureaucratic style of educational institutions. The founders of Deoband knew such institutions well. Many of them, including three Deputy Inspectors of the Education Department, were government servants, while some others had attended British style educational institutions. They had thus gained close familiarity with the methods employed in the running of these institutions, and chose to compete with them on equivalent terms.<sup>18</sup> The school that evolved was, in its sources of funding, organizational structure, and

---

<sup>16</sup> The title for an *alim*, an Islamic scholar

<sup>17</sup> The title of someone who has performed the *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, p. 92-94

goals, a very 'modern' institution, despite being a bastion of traditional Islamic education, and became a model for subsequent *madrassahs* to emulate.

Traditionally, Islamic education was imparted by families dedicated to religious scholarship, in their own homes or in the corner of a mosque; there was no central library, no set course of study, and no series of examinations. A student would seek out a teacher for a particular book, and upon completion of his studies receive a certificate listing the books he had read and testifying to his accomplishment, allowing him to take on students of his own in that particular text. Upon receiving this *ijazah*<sup>19</sup> he would move on to another teacher for another book, or return home. The number of books studied and the expertise of the scholars with whom he had studied became a measure of his own knowledge and ability.

The *ulama* in such a setting had depended primarily on revenue from endowments and on the patronage of princes and aristocrats, and were part of the larger structure of a Muslim state.<sup>20</sup> The Deobandi *ulama*, in contrast, had to secure funding through independent sources, and the mechanism hence introduced was one of the most striking, and innovative, characteristics of the school. Most of its income was derived from popular contributions pledged annually by a wide and varied base of supporters, the complex system requiring careful book-keeping and transparency in managing accounts, and relying on the new facilities of postal service, money orders and the printing press.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Permission, specifically granted to a student at the completion of a book to offer instruction in it himself.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, p. 94

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 97

Another particularly striking feature of the new school was the participation of people with no ties of kinship: the school was not in the hands of a single family, subject to the understood and accepted norms of kin behavior. Rather, its staff consisted of personnel with specific responsibilities, and members were asked to demonstrate openness and tolerance in dealing with each other, engaging in mutual consultation not on the basis of position but on that of the value of their ideas.<sup>22</sup>

The goal of the school was to train *ulama* well-versed in the different branches of Islamic knowledge, from both the *manqulat* and the *ma'qulat*, who would serve as prayer leaders, writers, preachers and teachers, and carry on the work of popular education, spreading instruction in “correct” Islamic beliefs and practices. They followed a set curriculum, basically the *Dars-e-Nizami*<sup>23</sup> evolved at an older eighteenth century *madrassah*, but with a greater emphasis on the study of *hadith*, which was to become the basis of their popular teaching. There were formal requirements for admission and matriculation, and students were expected to complete a course of study originally set for ten years, and later reduced to six. Students were regularly examined, an innovation in *madrassah* education that was not accepted without resistance, and prizes were awarded at the annual convocation to recognize those with the highest grades.<sup>24</sup>

The *ulama* of Deoband early on tried to establish a network of schools on the pattern of British universities with their affiliated colleges. The administrative set-up of these branch institutions was modeled on that of the parent school, the modified version of the *Dars-e-Nizami* curriculum taught at Deoband was also followed here;

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 95

<sup>23</sup> A syllabus of religious education current in South Asia from the eighteenth century

<sup>24</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, p. 100-105

the schools often submitted their records to Deoband for inspection, sought its approval for major decisions, and received its *ulama* both as examiners and distinguished visitors.<sup>25</sup> Many of these institutions were set-up by graduates of Deoband, and given the diversity of the student body at the parent institution, branch schools were opened over a wide geographic area; reportedly 8,934 affiliated *madrassahs* were established by the *Dar-ul-Uloom*'s centennial in 1967, and the spirit of reform developed at Deoband spread far and wide.

Deoband became not just the name of an institution but of a particular orientation towards religious knowledge and the method of its transmission, and came to signify commitment to a particular legal methodology and style of institutionalized spirituality. As Professor Barbara Metcalf puts it, "The *ulama* and their schools were Deobandi. Increasingly, the name of Deoband came to represent a distinct style, a *maslak*, of Indian Islam."<sup>26</sup> *Ulama* were, and continue to be, defined as Deobandi because of their association with *Dar-ul-Uloom* Deoband, having studied in the school, one of its affiliated *madrassahs*, or any *madrassah* modeled after it, and because of their commitment to traditionalism, and in particular the legal and spiritual orientation fostered at the institution.

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 125

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 136

## TRADITIONALISM, MODERNISM, AND ISLAMISM

Within *Sunni*<sup>27</sup> Islam, the Deobandi reform movement, originating from the *Dar-ul-Uloom* Deoband, was characterized by an approach to the religion that was self-consciously ‘traditional.’ Referring to Islamic traditionalism, historian of religion, William A. Graham, says:

“I mean by the term the long-standing, overt predilection in diverse strands of Islamic life for recourse to previous authorities, above all the Prophet and Companions, but also later figures...who are perceived as having revived (*jaddada*), reformed (*aslaha*), or preserved (*hafiza*), the vision and norms of true, pristine Islam, and thus as being in continuity with the original community, or *ummah*. All such authorities function as interpreters of God’s revealed word and as paradigms for the present and future. An important concomitant of this attitude is a wariness or even abhorrence of any “innovation” (*bid’ah*) that runs counter to the perceived tradition. Thus, Naqshbandi or Bektashi Sufi thought can be just as traditionalist as Hanbali or Maliki legal thought”<sup>28</sup>

This traditionalism consists, he says further, “not in some imagined atavism, regressivism, fatalism, or rejection of change and challenge,” but rather in the conviction that

“a personally guaranteed connection with a model past, and especially with model persons, offers the only sound basis for forming and reforming oneself and one’s society in any age. How one chooses to do that—and one must do it willy-nilly—is one’s own responsibility; Islamic history reveals myriad ways in which that has been attempted. Whatever its forms, being religious “Islamically” has meant taking history seriously and ultimately so, for history or, still more, biography (the history of persons) the prime medium through which authority and truth have been transmitted and thus made available for each new generation.”<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> *Sunnis*, or *Ahl-as-Sunnah wal-Jama’ah* (People of the Way (of the Prophet) and the community (of His companions), have constituted the majority of Muslims throughout Islamic history, and are distinguished from *Shi’is* and other theological offshoots from mainstream Islam.

<sup>28</sup> William A. Graham, *Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation*, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 23/3 (1993), p. 500

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 522

What is crucial in this transmission is that documents alone, however authentic, ancient, and well-preserved, are of limited use as basis of authoritative transmission without a contiguous chain of persons of both knowledge and piety to teach and convey them across the years.<sup>30</sup> The authenticity of this chain alone ensures that the transmitted knowledge, both *zahiri* (apparent) as in the knowledge of the jurists, and *batini* (esoteric) as of the Sufi masters, is the same knowledge that was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by God, and taught by him to his companions. While Graham acknowledges that anchoring authority in the establishment of links with the past is not unique to Muslims, he argues that this effort is nowhere more pervasive than in Islam, and is institutionalized here to an unparalleled degree.<sup>31</sup>

Fuad S. Naeem says about traditionalism in Islam:

“From this perspective, traditional Islam refers to both the Quranic Revelation and the Prophetic *Sunnah*<sup>32</sup> in themselves, as well as the subsequent life and activity of the Muslim community, whether it be in law, philosophy, art, mysticism, politics, or social life, which can be seen as a historical commentary upon, and continuity of, the original Revelation.”<sup>33</sup>

Pitted against traditional Islam, and against each other, are the competing strains of ‘modernism’ on the one hand, and ‘fundamentalism’ or ‘Islamism’ on the other. About modernism in general, Naeem says that it refers to:

“a world-view, with a whole body of ideas and their resultant institutions, that emerged in Europe as a result of the Renaissance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and which revolted against religion in all the various areas of life and replaced it with humanism, rationalism, and secularism. As a result of these ideas, the Western

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 507

<sup>31</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, p. 4

<sup>32</sup> The *Sunnah* refers to the Way of the Prophet, which consists of his words and deeds, as well as his tacit approvals and disapprovals, and which has been taken as the perfect model for the life of every Muslim since the beginning of Islam.

<sup>33</sup> Fuad S. Naeem, *A Traditional Islamic Response to the Rise of Modernism*, in *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, edited by Joseph E. B. Lumbard, p. 80

world transformed itself from the Christian civilization of the Middle Ages to the largely secular humanistic civilization it has become in modern times.

As for modernism in the Islamic world, it emerged, he says “from the direct influence of these foundational ideas of the modern West, often wed to the political and military power of colonialism.”<sup>34</sup>

In assessing the impact of modernist thinking on the Muslim world, Joseph Lumbard says:

“But as this mode of thought did not rise organically from within the Islamic intellectual tradition, its expressions in the Islamic world have consisted largely of warmed over Western ideologies under a thin veneer of Islamic terminology. Liberalizing modernists join with doctrinaire reformists in eschewing the great interpreters of the past, but go further, at times arguing for the abandonment of the Quran and *Sunnah*.”<sup>35</sup>

Muhammad Qasim Zaman identifies modernism as an intellectual and religio-political trend rooted in modern, secular, westernized institutions of education, and says about its rise in the Muslim world since the late nineteenth century:

“Modernist Muslim intellectuals have sought, since the nineteenth century, to find ways of making Islam compatible with what they have taken to be the challenges of the modern age. And their proposed reforms have encompassed virtually the entire spectrum of life in Muslim societies. The intellectual vigor with which these reforms were proposed, and the success with which they have been carried through—often in alliance with the postcolonial state—has varied from one Muslim society to another, as have the precise ways in which different thinkers among these modernists have viewed the Islamic tradition and defined themselves in relation to it. More often than not, however, the effort has been to retrieve the teachings to “true” Islam from the vast and oppressive edifice that centuries of “sterile” scholasticism, “blind” imitation of earlier authorities, and the “intransigence” of the religious specialists had built. In general, the modernist project is guided by the assurance that once retrieved

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Joseph E. B. Lumbard, *The Decline of Knowledge and the Rise of Ideology, in Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, edited by Joseph E. B. Lumbard, p. 68-69

through a fresh but “authentic” reading of the foundational texts, and especially of the Qu’ran, the teachings of Islam would appear manifestly in concord with the positions recommended by liberal rationalism.”<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, Islamism developed in the Muslims world as a reaction to the excesses of modernism, although its proponents are often trained in the same modern, westernized institutions of education as the modernists. For Islamists, efforts by modernist Muslim states to marry Western, liberal rationalism and Islam have come at the expense of the latter, and they seek to radically alter their societies and states through the public implementation of norms they take to be “truly” Islamic. However, Zaman points out that while these Islamists position themselves against Westerns ideas and institutions in ways that are starkly different from the posture assumed by Muslim modernists, their own intellectual positions are often formulated in terms firmly rooted in the discourses of the modern age. Such is, for example, the case of the Egyptian Syed Qutb, one of the most influential Islamist thinkers of the twentieth century, who, in his conception of social justice, is more indebted to modern Western ideas than to the Quran.<sup>37</sup>

Describing the general trend normally referred to in Western scholarship as “Islamism,” Naeem says:

“Fundamentalism, or literal reformism, although it serves as an umbrella term comprising many different movements with different beliefs and aims, generally implies a rejection of traditional Islamic scholarship and especially its intellectual and spiritual traditions; it calls for a return to the Quran and *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), interpreting these primary sources of Islam in a purely literalist and exclusivist manner, often in opposition to the traditional understanding and interpretation of these sacred texts. The groups denoted by the term often have a puritanical emphasis and an agenda

---

<sup>36</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, p. 7-8

<sup>37</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, p. 8

for Islamic revival on a social and political level but with little interest in the spiritual and intellectual aspects of Islam.”<sup>38</sup>

Joseph Lumbard refers to Islamists/fundamentalists as ‘stringent reformists’ and says about them that while they propose strict adherence to the Quran and *Sunnah*, inspiring many who yearn to live a more pious Islamic life, they do so by rejecting thirteen centuries of Islamic intellectual history, claiming that there is no need for help from thinkers of the past to understand and interpret the original sources. In the absence of such guidance narrow ideological interpretations of the faith comes to predominate, with those who fail to adopt this interpretation seen as unbelievers, or at best misguided.<sup>39</sup>

Naeem assesses the stance of Islamism/fundamentalism and modernism vis-à-vis traditional Islam as follows:

“Neither fundamentalism nor modernism is integral to Islamic civilization: both are reactions to the modern secular Western world, which has dominated the Islamic world for the last two centuries, first politically and militarily through colonialism, and later ideologically and culturally. They are also both united in their opposition to traditional Islam.”<sup>40</sup>

Lumbard analyzes it similarly in the following words:

“Liberal modernist Muslim thinkers and radical reformist activists are two sides of the same coin. Whereas medieval thinkers like Ghazali were able to analyze and utilize intellectual tools from outside influences, radical reformists reject them outwardly while submitting inwardly, and modernists attempt to patch them onto the fabric of Islam, some claiming that they have been a part of that fabric all along. Both movements represent a subversion of traditional values and teachings from within the Islamic tradition. In an effort to transform

---

<sup>38</sup> Fuad S. Naeem, *A Traditional Islamic Response to the Rise of Modernism, in Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, edited by Joseph E. B. Lumbard, p. 80

<sup>39</sup> Joseph E. B. Lumbard, *The Decline of Knowledge and the Rise of Ideology, in Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, edited by Joseph E. B. Lumbard, p. 68

<sup>40</sup> Fuad S. Naeem, *A Traditional Islamic Response to the Rise of Modernism, in Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, edited by Joseph E. B. Lumbard, p. 80

Islamic civilization, each has in fact hastened the onset of the very illnesses they sought to ameliorate. Rather than contemplating and evaluating Western civilization through the Islamic intellectual tradition, modernists have embraced many tenets of Western thought out of a deep sense of inferiority—a sense which results from mistaking the power of Western nations for the truth of Western ideologies. Finding these movements within their midst, the reformists have retreated to fanatical adherence and pietistic sentimentalism.”<sup>41</sup>

While the hallmark of traditional Islam is a demonstrated connectedness with the ideal community of believers around the Prophet, taught and trained in every aspect of the religion by Prophet Muhammad himself, modernism and Islamism/fundamentalism/ literal reformism represent breaks with the past by abandoning the methodology that establishes this continuity, despite claims to greater authenticity for having ascertained the Will of God directly from the revealed sources. As Naeem and Lumbard point out, the principles that the modernists identify as embodying the Divine Will are more an outcome of their western, secular, liberal education than rooted in the Quran and *Sunnah* (though the two are not always mutually exclusive); the rejection of the need for specialized training and *isnad*<sup>42</sup> in interpreting the original sources allows them to read their viewpoints into selected verses of the Quran and reject either the entire body of *hadith* or any narration that does not support their point of view. As for the Islamists, they also reject the entire corpus of elaborations, qualifications, differences of opinion, and interpretations in the multiple branches of the traditional sciences in favor of simplistic, single interpretations also allegedly drawn out from the Quran and *Sunnah*.

---

<sup>41</sup> Joseph E. B. Lumbard, *The Decline of Knowledge and the Rise of Ideology*, in *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, edited by Joseph E. B. Lumbard, p. 69

<sup>42</sup> A chain of transmission of knowledge, whether a saying of the Prophet, an interpretation of a verse of the Quran, or a legal opinion

For modernists, Islam's claim to universality necessitates its reduction to loosely-defined principles such as justice, equality, and human dignity, and justifies an almost wholesale adoption of the most popular social, political, and cultural ideas and forms at any given time; most present-day Muslim modernists, for instance, are strong advocates of democratization in the Muslims world, in the style of Western liberal democracy. For fundamentalists, touting the slogan "Islam is the solution," Islam's alleged applicability across time and space means an enforcement of their literal and unchanging interpretation of the *Shari'a* irrespective of context. Lacking a sophisticated interpretive methodology and displaying a self-righteous disregard for history, Islamist ideals are often utopian, the way to them often ambiguous.

The traditionalist orientation within *Sunni* Islam, while its claim to authenticity rests on its connectedness with the past, employs complex methodologies to first understand the multiple dimensions of the Quranic paradigm and the Prophetic example, and to then translate the principles enshrined therein into pertinent directives governing every aspect of life in any number of temporal and spatial contexts. Given that the predominant trend in Islam has always been of the traditionalist variety, it is precisely this flexibility and the existence of systematic methods for interpretation that has enabled Islam to live up to its claim of validity for vastly different times and places, and has allowed it to successfully meet the challenges posed by changing circumstances, while its rootedness in the foundations of the religion have ensured the preservation of its distinct character.

## LEGAL AND SPIRITUAL TRADITION OF DAR-UL-ULOOM DEOBAND

Islamic intellectual history is the history of attempts to identify and explicate what God has intended for humanity, and how best the Divine Will can be realized by believers in different times, in different places and in the face of changing circumstances. Traditional *ulama* recognize a difference between *Shari'a*, which refers to the totality of God's commandments, His Will as revealed in the Quran and exemplified by the *Sunnah* of His last Prophet and Messenger, and *fiqh*, which refers to the body of specific rulings derived from the *Shari'a*. The *Shari'a* consists of two basic categories of laws: the definitive, which are explicit and decisive, do not allow for interpretation, and the speculative, in which difference of opinion is allowed, taking into account human weakness and as a mercy to believers;<sup>43</sup> it is this second category of by-laws which is the subject matter of *fiqh*. The difference between the *Shari'a* and *fiqh* has been defined as follows:

“The scope of the *Shari'a* is wider than that of *fiqh*. It comprises beliefs (*'aqa'id*), rituals (*ibadat*), civil and social transactions (*mu'amalat*), and ethics (*akhlaq*), while *fiqh* comprises only rituals (*ibadat*) and social transactions (*mu'amalat*). The *Shari'a* is the textual law, while *fiqh* is the derivative law. Hence there might be no disagreement in the *Shari'a*, whereas there is disagreement in *fiqh*, since it has been derived by the jurists.”<sup>44</sup>

At the time of Prophet Muhammad, while the various branches of Islamic knowledge (such as the sciences of *Tafseer* or Quranic exegesis, *Hadith* collection and categorization, *Tajweed* or Quran recitation, *Tasawwuf* or Spirituality, etc.) were not codified as they came to be later on, different companions acquired expertise in different areas under the guidance of the Prophet, and the others deferred to their

<sup>43</sup> Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhalwi, *The Differences of the Imams*, p. 33

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2

authority in those fields. One of these areas of specialization was that of *fiqh*. While the Prophet was the ultimate authority on all matters during his lifetime, and his words, actions, and even his tacit approval on the actions of others became a part of the *Shari'a* itself, he taught his companions to use their judgment in his absence, regarding matters that were not explicitly dealt with in the Quran and *Sunnah*. For instance, on the occasion of appointing the famous companion Mu'az ibn Jabal, later referred to by the Prophet as the "Leader of the scholars in Paradise", to the post of Governor of Yemen, the Prophet had the following conversation with him. The Prophet asked: 'How will you judge the cases (that come to you)?' He replied: 'I will judge according to the Book of Allah'. 'But if you do not get anything there, what will you do?' the Prophet asked. He said: 'I will refer to the way of the Prophet'. 'But if you do not get it even there, what will you do?' the Prophet asked again. He replied: 'I will exercise my judgment.' Hearing this, the Prophet patted Mu'az on the shoulder and said: 'Praise be to God who has guided the Messenger of His Messenger to what pleases His Messenger'.<sup>45</sup>

The Prophet also allowed for more than one interpretation of his own sayings during his lifetime, and in fact declared that difference of opinion among the knowledgeable ones of his community was a mercy and blessing. For example, on one occasion the Prophet commanded a group of companions, setting out for a journey, to perform their *Asr*<sup>46</sup> prayer at their destination. Some of the companions took this command literally and delayed the prayer from its actual time to fulfill what they understood to be the meaning of the command issued to them. Others regarded

<sup>45</sup> Found in the collection of sayings of the Prophet (pbuh) by *Nisa'i*: No. 1327

<sup>46</sup> The *Asr* prayer is the third of the five daily prayers mandatory on Muslims; it is performed in the late afternoon and its time ends with the setting of the sun.

the words of the Prophet to be a command to reach their destination in haste, i.e. by the time of the *Asr* prayer. Hence they performed the prayer at its appointed time, en-route to their destination. When the difference between the companions was later presented to him, the Prophet did not disapprove of the actions of either of the two groups.<sup>47</sup>

The rulings of the companions who specialized in passing legal judgments on novel matters not addressed directly in the Quran and *Sunnah* were formulated in the light of the overall objectives of the *Shari'a*, where possible by recourse to analogy with established precedents in the original sources. Their differences and agreements were both passed down to subsequent generations of students through sound chains of transmission, their consensus recognized as authoritative and not open to further debate and interpretation. In the third generation territorial expansion and the intermingling of cultures coupled with material developments gave rise to a large number of new questions, as well as doubts about transmitted opinions. The need was felt to systematize the methodology for deriving rules to avoid inconsistencies, and the principles on which the transmitted opinions were based were inferred by leading scholars of the time based on knowledge of Arabic grammar, syntax, theology, the textual material of legal relevance in the authoritative sources, and acquaintance with methods employed by the companions themselves.<sup>48</sup> While they agreed with each other on basic matters of belief and worship, they differed on a wide variety of minor points, perhaps because the Arabic could be understood in more than one way, or because the particular Qur'an or *hadith* text admitted of qualifications given in other

---

<sup>47</sup> Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhalwi, *The Differences of the Imams*, p. 34-35

<sup>48</sup> Ahmad Hasan, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, p. 17

texts, some of them acceptable for reasons of legal methodology to some scholars but not others<sup>49</sup>, or because the same act of the Prophet could be regarded as either coincidental and so without any legal bearing, or willful and so a part of the *Shari'a*<sup>50</sup>. Apart from these and many other reasons for differences to arise, they also held somewhat different approaches to the law, being, for instance, more or less stringent in the criteria for making an act mandatory, or more or less flexible in adopting customary practices.

These principles were systematically compiled, giving rise to the science of *Usul-ul-Fiqh* (Foundations/Principles of Islamic law) and later used for the derivation of further rules in response to new questions arising with changing circumstances across time and space, right to the present day. The differences among scholars about what these principles were, based on the transmitted differences among the companions, gave rise to many different schools of law, all of them being fruits of attempts to interpret God's will as contained in the flawless and ageless textual sources (*Shari'a*) to arrive at derivative law (*fiqh*). Out of these four have survived in their entirety, the *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi'i*, and *Hanbali*, named subsequently after their founders; they evolved in the ninth century, and each is considered equally valid and legitimate by the others.

The recognition that the derivation of *fiqh* from the *Shari'a* was the outcome of fallible human effort allowed not only for the acceptability of a variation in legal rulings across the different schools of law, but the same general principles applied to

---

<sup>49</sup> Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *Why Muslims Follow Madhhabs*,  
<http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/madhhabstlk.htm>

<sup>50</sup> Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhalwi, *The Differences of the Imams*, p. 20

different contexts also led jurists to rule differently within a particular *mazhab*<sup>51</sup>, depending on the circumstances. In the *Hanafi* school, for instance the same act, e.g. marriage, could fall into any one of the main categories of legal rulings, being *haram* (prohibited) at the one end, and *fard* (mandatory) at the other, and all shades in between, depending on the circumstances under consideration<sup>52</sup>. Furthermore, because customary practice (*urf*) that did not contradict the *Shari'a* was an accepted source of law on a variety of issues, especially in the *Hanafi mazhab*, *fatwas* by *Hanafi* scholars could differ from one cultural context to another without compromising the consistency of the methodology. Also, while adherence to one school of law, rather than picking and choosing between them, was highly preferred to maintain consistency and to ensure that individuals did not simply follow rulings that were in accordance with their desires, jurists from one school could rule according to the laws of another if, for instance, applying the methodology of the school yielded a ruling that was deemed excessively difficult to follow.

Each school was associated with a particular geographic area within the Muslim world, with the *Hanafi* school of law being widespread in the Indian sub-continent. The *ulama* of Deoband believed in *taqlid*, the necessity of following an established school of law, and from among the four schools were dedicated followers of the *Hanafi mazhab*.<sup>53</sup> This set them apart from the modernists and *Ahl-e-Hadith*

---

<sup>51</sup> School of law

<sup>52</sup> If a man, for instance, is sure that he will engage in fornication—a major sin in Islam—it would be mandatory for him to marry. If on the other hand, he is sure that he will be abusive towards his wife, it will be forbidden for him to enter into a marital relationship.

<sup>53</sup> For a traditionalist response to objections against following a school of law, see Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *Why Muslims Follow Madhhabs*, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/madhhabstlk.htm>, and Abdul Hakim Murad, *Understanding the Four Madhhabs*, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/newmadhh.htm>

who were staunch opponents of *taqlid* and claimed that every Muslim could, and should, interpret for themselves the original sources and derive rulings to govern individual and collective action.

Besides believing in the necessity of *taqlid* and following one of the four established schools of law, adherents to a traditional approach to Islam typically recognize the validity, indeed the indispensability, of institutionalized Sufism, often being pledged into one of the established Sufi orders. While the sciences of *Fiqh* and *Usul-ul-Fiqh* were developed by generations to come to preserve and build on the outward teachings of the Messenger of God, so the science of *Tasawwuf*, or Sufism, evolved to preserve and transmit the teachings of the Prophet pertaining to the acquisition of certain states of the heart (of humility, gratefulness, attentiveness towards God, detachment from worldly pleasures, sincerity, etc.) and elimination of certain others (of greed, lust, envy, boastfulness, anger, etc.). Just as the Prophet taught his companions the outward postures of the mandatory prayer, for instance, so also he conveyed to them the spirit behind it; the internal state of absolute surrender to God that must ideally be experienced as a believer physically prostrates before his Creator. Just as he taught them, for example, that the consumption of alcohol was prohibited, so also he made it clear that arrogance was a major sin and must be eradicated from a believer's heart, for a mustard seed worth of arrogance could prevent a person from entering Paradise. The *fuqaha* (experts in *fiqh*) tell the believer that it is recommended to praise God upon completion of a meal, for instance, while it

is the Sufis who transmit to them a state of gratitude to God for even the smallest morsel of the plainest bread.<sup>54</sup>

*Tasawwuf* is considered by adherents to the traditional approach to Islam to be as necessary for the complete implementation of Sacred Law, the *Shari'a*, in one's life as is *fiqh*, for it is necessary for the attainment of a state of the heart demanded by the Quran and *Sunnah*<sup>55</sup> and to obey the commands of God and His final Messenger pertaining to one's innermost thoughts, feelings, and intentions. As the famous Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun writes:

“Sufism belongs to the sciences of the *Shari'a* that originated in Islam. It is based on the assumption that the practice of its adherents had always been considered by the important early Muslims, the men around Muhammad and the men of the second generation, as well as those who came after them, as the path to truth and right guidance. The Sufi approach is based upon constant application to divine worship, complete devotion to God, aversion to the false splendor of the world, abstinence from the pleasure, property, and position to which the great mass aspire, and retirement from the world into solitude for divine worship. These things were general among the men around Muhammad and the early Muslims.”<sup>56</sup>

Just as the transmission of knowledge of legal rulings cannot take place simply through an independent study of books containing this knowledge, but rather has to be acquired from a qualified teacher, so also must intense love for God, commitment to executing His will, deep pleasure in worship, purification of the self (*tazkiyat-e-naafs*), indifference towards the temptations of this world, *ihsan* (beauty or excellence) in one's dealings with God and others, and other desirable internal states be attained by sitting at the feet of a qualified instructor. In fact, the relationship

---

<sup>54</sup> From a speech by Shaikh Kamaluddin Ahmed, Islamabad, Pakistan, January 3, 2005

<sup>55</sup> For more on a traditionalist approach to *Tasawwuf*, read Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *The Place of Tasawwuf in Traditional Islam*, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/sufitlk.htm>

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Joseph E. B. Lombard, *The Decline of Knowledge and the Rise of Ideology*, in *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, edited by Joseph E. B. Lombard, p. 48

between student and teacher is at the heart of the learning process in *Tasawwuf*, and one becomes a *salik*, a traveler on the spiritual path, by pledging allegiance to an accomplished Sufi master.

Just like in the evolution of *fiqh*, there also evolved different streams within *Tasawwuf*, each with its own approach to the attainment of the same goal, its own style of meditative practices, and its particular division of the spiritual journey into stages or lessons. With time, four main Sufi orders became best known—the *Naqshbandi*, *Chishti*, *Qadiri*, and *Suharwardi*—each named after a key individual in the chain and each tracing back to the Prophet through a close companion. Once a seeker reached a certain level of spiritual development, he received an *ijazah*, an authorization by his teacher to take on disciples of his own, and since multiple students of the same teacher could receive authorization in this manner, there developed many different branches of the four main orders. The various Sufi orders have their origins in the teachings of Prophet Muhammad just as much as the different schools of law—a measure of authenticity of any particular branch of any order being, in fact, whether the Sufi masters of that particular stream are linked to the Prophet through an uninterrupted chain of students and teachers.

The Deobandi *ulama* were devoted not only to *Hanafi* law but also to Sufi doctrine and practice. Many leading Deobandis were trained in the *Chishti* method, but were strongly influenced by the practices and general approach of the *Naqshbandi* order, towards sobriety in spiritual experience and rigorous adherence to the *Shari'a*<sup>57</sup>. Their approach to *Tasawwuf* was much different from the popular understanding and practice of Sufism at the time; they eschewed and in fact taught

---

<sup>57</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, p. 28

against deviant customary observances, and challenged the centrality of tombs of dead saints and the networks of support for them. While the Sufism of the masses emphasized the intercessory role of the Sufi saint in ensuring salvation, the Deobandis considered central the individual responsibility of each disciple to develop spiritually by adhering to Divine Law and practicing the *Sunnah*, and in fact affirmed that the most advanced mystic was the one who most successfully emulated the Prophetic example.<sup>58</sup>

### SUMMARY

The Islamic seminary at Deoband was established as a bastion of traditional Islam, though its founders saw no contradiction between its purpose and its uniquely modern structure and organization; this view was expressed by *Maulana* Ashraf Ali Thanvi, one of the most revered Deobandi scholars, as follows:

“Imitation of the disbelievers (*kuffar*) in the matters of religion is forbidden and in matters of customary practice is gravely disliked. In the remaining matters of inventions and administration, it is permissible and in actuality this is not considered imitation anyhow.”<sup>59</sup>

The traditional orientation within Islam is marked by an emphasis on *isnad*, an uninterrupted chain of transmission connecting the present with the paradigmatic community of believers developed by Prophet Muhammad during his lifetime, and also of his surviving companions after his death, which is the prototype for “human

---

<sup>58</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, p. 157, 181-183

<sup>59</sup> Fareeha Khan, *Being Muslim in Pre-Partition India: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Negotiation of Identity and Politics*, p. 8

society properly ordered under God's ordained norms.”<sup>60</sup> Knowledge is transmitted within this tradition—both outward knowledge about the form of worship, standards of behavior governing interpersonal relations, business transactions, political activity etc. and intimate knowledge of the Divine—from teacher to student such that the last student in any chain of transmission is linked through a string of known “servants of God” who have embodied the ideals of the original prophetic community, to the Prophet Muhammad himself.

However, the body of transmitted knowledge did not remain static. On the contrary, it grew at every stage, never weakening its link to the teachings of the Prophet, but ever-expanding in the light of new ideas and in the face of new challenges. Sophisticated methodologies developed in the various religious sciences, most prominently that of Islamic law, to engage novel ideas and respond to the latest challenges; the sciences of *Fiqh* (and *Usul-ul-Fiqh*) and *Tasawwuf* grew to preserve and ensure adherence to the prophetic paradigm pertaining to believers' outward actions and their inner states respectively.

While there are several variations within the two opposing trends of modernism and Islamism/fundamentalism/literal reformism, the Aligarh and *Ahl-e-Hadith* movements surfacing in India around the same time as the traditionalist Deobandi Movement being versions of the two, both approaches are marked by a lack of connectedness to the past on the one hand, and want of methodologies to creatively engage new ideas and challenges on the other. The former deficiency results in a departure from the teachings of the Quran and the Prophetic example, while the latter amounts to a wholesale adoption of alien ideas in the case of modernism, and

---

<sup>60</sup> William A. Graham, *Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation*, p. 505

simplistic, decontextualized responses to contemporary needs in the case of Islamism/fundamentalism/literal reformism.

The political involvement of the *ulama* of Deoband, and the reasoning on which it was based, are firmly rooted in their traditionalist orientation. An understanding of this orientation vis-à-vis other major trends within Islamic thought provides the framework within which to develop an alternative theory of politics to the two extremes proposed by modernist thinkers on the one hand, and fundamentalists/Islamists on the other; an approach to politics that balances commitment to the teachings of Islam and connectedness with the Prophetic example with responsiveness to existing challenges in an orderly manner.

## CHAPTER THREE

### POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT OF THE *ULAMA* OF DEOBAND

#### PARTICIPATION IN THE MUTINY OF 1857

It is today widely accepted that the *ulama* of the period were actively involved in the struggle against the British. The author of the biography of *Maulana* Husain Ahmed Madani, one of the most politically active of the Deobandi *ulama*, says in his preface:

“The *ulama* were the first to give warning against the threat to India’s political power and cultural life from the British who came seeking trade facilities and, through cunning manipulation of contradictions among local rulers and chieftains, became the rulers over this rich country. It was their inspiration in the main that resulted in the first great uprising in 1857 which the British called the Mutiny and patriotic Indians termed as the First War of Independence.”<sup>61</sup>

One group from among the heirs to the *ulama* of Deoband claim that the founders of the school were actively involved in the uprising, even organizing a counter-government and engaging in military revolt during September 1857 in the town of Thanah Bhawan.<sup>62</sup> On the official website of the institution, under the heading ‘*Dar-ul-Uloom* in the Fight for Freedom’ it is stated:

“The *ulama* of Deoband, with resoluteness and trust in Allah, have always been not only in the foremost rank of those who have struggled in the movement for the independence of India but they have also frequently been in the lead of this movement for independence; and if it is seen more thoughtfully and justly, they were the first persons, the

<sup>61</sup> D. R. Goyal, *Maulana Husain Ahmad Madni: A Biographical Study*, Preface

<sup>62</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, p. 82

pioneers, who initiated this idea. The warmth, vigour and catholicity which was created in this movement in fact is indebted to them. Most of these gentlemen raised the banner of revolt against the English government, fought face to face with the English army and many of them passed a good part of their lives in jail. The fact is that the history of the independence movement of India is so mixed up with the history of the *ulama* and religious personalities that it is now difficult to separate one from the other.”<sup>63</sup>

In fact, from this perspective, the creation of the institution in 1867 was an extension of the *ulama*'s struggle for independence from the British colonizers. *Maulana* Mahmood-ul-Hasan, a disciple of the founder of the school *Maulana* Muhammad Qasim Nanautavi and the school's first student, who was later to be incarcerated for his activities against the British, is quoted as having said regarding the establishment of *Dar-ul-Uloom* Deoband:

“As far as I know, after the failure of uprising of 1857, it was decided to establish a centre (institution) where people could be trained to overcome the failure of 1857.”<sup>64</sup>

This view of the role of the *ulama* in general, and of the founders of the school at Deoband in particular, in the Mutiny of 1857 has been contested and downplayed by others, even from among the Deobandi *ulama*. According to a leading historian of the *ulama* of this period, Barbara D. Metcalf, the motives behind the uprising were complex and varied, and leadership was accordingly diverse. She notes that even for the Muslims, the *ulama* were only one kind of leader, with landlords and tribal and family chiefs being of great importance as well. In some regions the role of the *ulama* was, in fact, minor as compared to the landlords, who could mobilize both financial and human resources, and their overall role in the revolt was at best

---

<sup>63</sup> <http://www.darululoom-deoband.org/>

<sup>64</sup> *Maulana* Syed Mohammad Mian, translated by Mohammad Anwer Hussain and Hasan Imam, *The Prisoners of Malta (Asiran-e-Malta)*, p. 4

fragmentary and divided.<sup>65</sup> Referring to the claim about the insurgency in the town of Thanah Bhawan she says:

“This account has been invariably accepted, yet this view of events at Thanah Bhawan, identifying the posts of each member and the course of the uprising, appears only in secondary sources written after about 1920. Earlier biographies argue that the accusations of involvement were those of enemies, and that the ultimate release from jail of Rashid Ahmad, who spent six months confined, and the fact that Muhammad Qasim was never arrested, testify to the loyalty of both men.”<sup>66</sup>

Furthermore, as Metcalf points out, there had been considerable debate over the legitimacy of fighting the British at this time. *Ulama* close to the group that founded the school at Deoband rejected its validity on the grounds that taking up arms against an enemy was only legitimate from an Islamic standpoint when there was reasonable hope of success.<sup>67</sup> However, regardless of how directly and actively the *ulama* were involved in the Mutiny of 1857, they were perceived by the British to have played an important role in the uprising and were accordingly punished, and, as has gone before, reforms were introduced to curtail their influence. While most *ulama* in the decades to follow did not directly confront the new rulers in recognition of their relative weakness, they saw the Mutiny as a sign of British barbarity and British rule as a threat to their religion and culture, and resentment against the colonizers festered as a result.

### POST-MUTINY POLITICAL ACTIVISM

The two Deobandi scholars most known for their political activism were *Maulana* Mahmood Hasan, the very first student of the school and later one of its

---

<sup>65</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, p. 81-82

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p. 82

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*

most famous teachers and fourth principal, and his student at the *Dar-ul-Uloom*, *Maulana* Husain Ahmed Madani. So as not to implicate the institution in any anti-government activity, *Maulana* Mahmood Hasan founded other institutions that on the surface were educational establishments, and indeed functioned as such, but which also served as covers for anti-government activities. He was also involved in setting up other organizations with overtly political agendas, which eventually led to an arrest warrant being issued against him by the British government.

Eventually, in the wake of World War I, he led the way to planning an armed insurrection against the British, to garner support for which he dispatched his deputy *Maulana* Obaidullah Sindhi to Afghanistan, to mobilize the frontier tribes against the British. However, the Amir of Afghanistan had been bought by the British and was creating dissensions among the frontier tribes to curtail their imminent threat to the British. *Maulana* Mahmood himself proceeded to Mecca in an attempt to establish connection with the Turkish governor of the Hijaz<sup>68</sup>, hoping to obtain the support of the Muslim Caliph in Turkey for the proposed revolution against the British in India; the timing of his departure from India allowed him to narrowly escape arrest by the British. In Mecca, the Turkish governor endorsed the struggle of the Indian Muslims against the British, and signed a declaration of war that was dispatched back to India; an endorsement of the proposed armed insurrection and support of *Maulana* Mahmood Hasan as its leader by the deputy of the highest Muslim authority, the Caliph, would, it was thought, unite the dissenting frontier tribes behind the cause. The Turkish governor was also requested to facilitate *Maulana* Mahmood's passage

---

<sup>68</sup> The Western part of present-day Saudi Arabia, which includes the two Holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

to Istanbul so that a meeting could be arranged with the Caliph himself, a request which the governor accepted.

However, before this plan could be realized, the Arab revolt against the Ottomans began at the instigation of the British, led by Sharif Hussain, who had been ruling Mecca on behalf of the Ottomans. To justify the revolt, Sharif Hussain attempted to secure a *fatwa* from the *ulama* in Mecca that declared the Ottoman Turks to be infidels. *Maulana* Mahmood Hasan's signature was also sought; if he was to sign the *fatwa*, the British policy towards Turkey would be justified and the anger of the Indian Muslims towards the British for their designs against the institution of the caliphate would be pacified, and if he were to refrain from signing it there would be reason for the Sharif of Mecca to hand the *Maulana* over to the British. *Maulana* Mahmood refused to sign the *fatwa* and both him and *Maulana* Husain Ahmed Madani, who had been residing and teaching in Medina for several years after having migrated there from India for personal reasons and who had hosted and had been helping his former teacher in the Hijaz, were arrested and sent to Malta, where they were imprisoned for three years.<sup>69</sup>

Upon his return to India from Malta, *Maulana* Mahmood Hasan realized that his earlier plans of armed insurrection against the British with the help of foreign support had no longer any scope in India, and he channeled his continued resentment against British rule towards support for the Non-Cooperation Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, the dramatic change in strategy reflecting dynamism and pragmatism in his approach to politics. He endorsed their

---

<sup>69</sup> D.R.Goyal, *Maulana Husain Ahmed Madani, A Biographical Study*, p. 56-67

agenda by issuing a celebrated *fatwa* that was signed by hundreds of other *ulama*.<sup>70</sup>

The *fatwa* read as follows:

“On return from Malta I have learnt that the leaders of India have adopted a final path to carry out their obligations and to defend their sentiments and rights, that is, that they should stick to the tenets of the Holy Quran and follow the great and good tradition of the Prophet and, accordingly, assess the pros and cons for the nation and thereupon fearlessly carry out the program; that path is none other than cooperation with the forces inimical to Islam. The issue before us is not contrary to the *Shari'a*. The honorable course for a true Muslim can only be that (i) he should return the honors and decorations conferred by the government, (ii) refuse to join the councils currently proposed, (iii) use only indigenous products, and (iv) not put his children in government schools and colleges. Besides, all the resolutions passed from time to time should be strictly followed. Care should however be taken that (a) in carrying out these resolutions nothing contrary to the *Shari'a* should be done, (b) whatever threatens violence or is likely to disturb peace should be avoided and in every respect moderation be preferred to extremist action. *Hazrat Usman*<sup>71</sup> says, “When people are doing good work, join them, and when they turn to evil, keep away from it.” This saying should ever be kept in mind.”<sup>72</sup>

*Maulana* Mahmood Hasan passed away shortly after his return from Malta, and *Maulana* Husain Ahmed Madani was acknowledged as the heir to his political struggle. *Maulana* Husain had initially left Madina, where he had established himself as a teacher of *hadith*, and joined *Maulana* Mahmood Hasan in Mecca simply to support and serve his former teacher, and not with the intention of getting involved in the Indian struggle, though he was in agreement with its goals and with the strategies employed by *Maulana* Mahmood Hasan.<sup>73</sup> The period of internment in Malta, however, allowed him the opportunity to interact with political prisoners from around

---

<sup>70</sup> *Maulana* Syed Mohammad Mian, *The Prisoners of Malta*, p. 57

<sup>71</sup> One of the most venerated companions of Prophet Muhammad; the third Caliph of the Muslims and his son-in-law

<sup>72</sup> D.R.Goyal, *Maulana Husain Ahmed Madani, A Biographical Study*, p. 82-83

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, p. 84

the world, all incarcerated because of their resistance to British colonial rule, and his political resolve was strengthened.<sup>74</sup> Upon his return to India from Malta—he had preferred to accompany his aging teacher over returning to Medina—and the demise of *Maulana* Mahmood Hasan, *Maulana* Husain plunged headlong into politics.

*Maulana* Husain threw the weight of his support behind the Indian National Congress and the *Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind* (Association of the Scholars of India), both of which urged unity between Hindus and Muslims in their common struggle against the British; it is from the platform of the *Jamiat* that he carried on much of his political struggle. On the one hand, he not only pushed the agenda outlined in his predecessor's *fatwa*, which declared that the goals of the Non-Cooperation Movement were in line with the *Shari'a*, he went as far as to claim that any kind of cooperation with the British was, in fact, prohibited for Muslims, and that non-cooperation was the religious duty of every believer, remarks that were threatening enough to the establishment to lead to a brief incarceration.<sup>75</sup> He practiced the principles of non-cooperation with as much commitment as he preached them; it is reported that if someone offered him a bar of foreign soap to wash his hands he would refuse to touch it, and if he had to lead the prayer and discovered that the prayer mat was not indigenous he would remove it and pray on a straw mat instead.<sup>76</sup>

While advocating non-cooperation with the British on the one hand, on the other *Maulana* Husain urged Muslims to cooperate with their fellow Indians of different religions in their joint struggle against British imperialism. The only way to overthrow British rule in the sub-continent, a goal which he felt was a primary

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p. 68-69

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p. 108

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 147

Islamic obligation of Indian Muslims under the circumstances, was for the Hindus and Muslims to work against it together; the seeds of Muslim nationalism were sowed by the British, he felt, as part of their policy of divide and rule. He said:

“For this unity we need not merge our religious identities; no man of faith would tolerate it...Hindus as Hindus and Muslims as Muslims should come together and make efforts for the liberation of the country. All people should follow the advice of the leaders. It should at the same time be borne in mind that the enemy and its lackeys would try to break this unity by raising religion related problems and disrupt this unity. They should not be listened to and we should proceed with utmost care and perseverance.”<sup>77</sup>

He argued that while the Muslims of India were a distinct religious entity from the other religious communities in the sub-continent, they were part of the same ‘nation’ (*qawm*) as their Hindu compatriots, since a ‘nation’ was not constituted by ties of faith. He found justification for this concept from the depiction of prophets mentioned in the Quran as belonging to the same *qawm* as the infidels to whom they preached, and that Prophet Muhammad himself had created in Medina a ‘nation’ that constituted Muslims and Jews. The term *ummah*, while commonly used to refer exclusively to the Muslim community, could also, he claimed, be similarly used to include other communities. These were different, *Maulana* argued, from the concept of *milla*, which denoted a religion, a religious law, and a faith-based path as well as the community of those who follow it. Differences of religion were immaterial to the constitution of a *qawm*, just as they were central to a *milla*, and what *Maulana* Husain was arguing for was the creation of the former, and not the latter.<sup>78</sup>

*Maulana* Husain’s rejection of Muslim nationalism was also based on his pan-Islamic ideals, the concept that all Muslims, regardless of where they are in the world,

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p. 107-108

<sup>78</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, p. 33

constitute one community, one *milla*; he considered it unacceptable that one segment of the universal community of Muslims define itself in territorial terms to the exclusion of Muslims elsewhere. In both implications of Muslim nationalism he saw the insidious designs of the British; on the one hand to weaken the struggle against imperial rule, and on the other to divide the global community of Muslims on the basis of territorial nationalism. After the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan he said remorsefully:

“Partition has divided the interests of Muslims also. For instance, what is good for Pakistan may not necessarily be good for India; there can quite often be contradiction between the two. Similarly, what is good for Pakistani Muslims may not be good for Indian Muslims too. Indeed, it is quite possible that something may be quite useful for Pakistani Muslims but may spell disaster for Indian Muslims. In the face of such contradiction we have to choose between the interests of Indian Muslims and Pakistani Muslims.”<sup>79</sup>

*Maulana* Husain’s advocacy of the idea of united or composite nationalism brought him into confrontation with the Muslim League, an increasingly popular political organization that proposed that the Muslims were a separate nation from the Hindus and for which the demand for a separate state for the Muslims of the sub-continent took precedence over the demand for British departure from India; indeed, a separate homeland for the Muslims must be created while the British were still in power in India. While the Muslim League consisted largely of secular Muslims, it used the rhetoric of religious nationalism to inspire the masses, declaring Muslims to be a separate nation from the Hindus of India on the basis of their distinct religious identity, and hence deserving of a separate nation-state. His position also entered him into a controversy with several leaders of Muslim opinion, such as the highly

---

<sup>79</sup> D.R.Goyal, *Maulana Husain Ahmed Madani, A Biographical Study*, p. 233

influential modernist poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal who was a strong advocate of the Two-Nation Theory and believed that religion could be the only real basis for nationalism, and the well-known Islamist thinker, Syed Abul A'la Mawdudi.

### THE OTHER DEOBANDI PERSPECTIVE

*Maulana* Husain's stance was also opposed by some leading Deobandi *ulama* who supported the cause of a separate state for the Muslims, seeing that as the only way to ensure the preservation of Islamic culture and identity. Among these was *Maulana* Ashraf Ali Thanvi, who lent his support to the Muslim League, and his nephew *Maulana* Zafar Ahmad Uthmani, who was among the founders of the *Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Islam* (Association of the Scholars of Islam), a political party formed in 1945 by *ulama* that disagreed with the united nationalism of the *Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind*.

*Maulana* Ashraf Ali Thanvi was skeptical about Muslim participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement on the grounds that it employed methods that were contrary to the *Shari'a*, and illegitimate means cannot be used to attain even the noblest of ends. Even though a boycott of foreign goods was in itself a permissible act according to the *Shari'a*, the way it is used by enthusiasts of the Non-Cooperation Movement, argues *Maulana* Thanvi, made it impermissible. Volunteers had been appointed at shops where British goods were sold, and shop-keepers were either prevented from selling them, or if they did sell them the buyers were forced to return them, even though Islamic law allows for business transactions, save in a few specific items, even with a country with which the Muslims are at war. This caused unjustified

losses to the shopkeepers and subsequent financial hardship upon their families. Forcing the buyers of the foreign goods to return the purchased items after the completion of the contract was also illegal according to the Islamic laws of buying and selling. Furthermore, shopkeepers and their customers who refused to comply were penalized, which constituted oppression.<sup>80</sup>

*Maulana* Ashraf Ali Thanvi's political stance on the issue of partition seems to be motivated primarily by his concern for Muslim culture and identity, which he believed was under threat at the time. It is this concern that led him to discourage his followers from being too involved with non-Muslims; he considered the domination of the Indian National Congress by non-Muslims in itself a serious deterrent from attachment with the organization, even before ideological differences came to a head. Initially, he even disapproved of joining organizations headed by irreligious Muslims, advising that one should only agree to work in an organization of pious Muslims, for only then could one safeguard his religion.<sup>81</sup>

However, it is this same concern for Muslim identity that led him to eventually lend support to the Muslim League and its agenda of a separate state for the Muslims of India, to safeguard Islam from its enemies who would be bent upon destroying it after Indian independence. While this meant participation in an organization of "irreligious" Muslims, and endorsing the establishment of a state on what were, despite the rhetoric, clearly political and nationalistic rather than religious grounds, he considered his choice as the lesser of two evils, and in guiding his

---

<sup>80</sup> Justice Muhammad Taqi Uthmani, *Hakeem-ul-Ummat Kay Siyasi Afkar/Political Thoughts of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi*, p. 60-62

<sup>81</sup> Fareeha Khan, *Being Muslim in Pre-Partition India: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Negotiation of Identity and Politics*, p. 8-10

followers towards it, he was in fact acting upon the principle in *fiqh* of accepting the lesser harm to avoid the greater harm when only two options are available. He hoped that once Pakistan came into being, he and his followers could guide the otherwise misguided Muslim Leaguers in running the state more in accordance with the *Shari'a*; he was willing to encourage the nationalistic associations with Islam that they played upon in the hope that perhaps eventually the connection with Islam will strengthen.<sup>82</sup> He advised one of his disciples and another famous Deobandi scholar, *Maulana Shabbir Ahmad Uthmani*:

“It seems that the Leaguers will be successful and whatever (Muslim) state will be established will be governed by them whom we now call *fasiq awr fajir* (big sinners). If through your efforts these (Muslim Leaguers) become religious and honest, and if they are the ones who govern the state, then it is all right. We are not interested in governing a state. Our sole aim is that whatever (Muslim) state is established that should be in the hands of religious and honest persons so that Allah’s *din* (way of life) reigns supreme.”<sup>83</sup>

In the hope of attaining this goal, *Maulana Shabbir Ahmad Uthmani* continued to remain active in Pakistani politics after the country was created in 1947.

*Maulana Husain Ahmed Madani*’s concept of united nationalism was also strongly contested by *Maulana Zafar Ahmad Uthmani*, among the founders of the competing organization of traditional *ulama* in India, which supported the creation of Pakistan. A refutation of the concept takes the form of a short treatise embedded in the twelfth volume of a monumental commentary on *hadith* by *Maulana Uthmani*, the *I’la al-Sunan*. *Maulana Uthmani* argues that a united nationalism would be acceptable according to the *Shari'a* if the Muslim were in the majority so that their law and culture defined the law and culture of the land; however, a unified nation in

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p. 11-12

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 12

which non-Muslims are the majority would result in the destruction of Islam, and would therefore be prohibited according to the *Shari'a*. Thus defining united nationalism in a way that necessitates loss or privatization of religion and the eventual destruction of Islam, he proceeds to use numerous Prophetic sayings that warn against intermingling of religions, and emphasizes the importance in Islamic law of maintaining sharp boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims. *Maulana* Uthmani also critiques the adoption of civil disobedience as the preferred means of proponents of united nationalism on the grounds that it was not rooted in the Prophetic *Sunnah* and, in fact, compromised it. While he does not explicitly articulate it, *Maulana* Uthmani's arguments in the treatise suggest that the only viable way in which the future of the Muslim community can be secured it for Muslims to have a state of their own<sup>84</sup>

## SUMMARY

Regardless of how active the founders of *Dar-ul-Uloom* Deoband had been in the Mutiny of 1857 against the British, and notwithstanding the place of political ambitions in the goals they set for the institution, several of its leading *ulama* found themselves involved in the most important political movements of the day in the decades following the establishment of the institution. In their role as Islamic legal experts and spiritual guides, the *fatwas* they issued and advice they imparted to their students and disciples, or other believers searching for answers in highly confusing times, conveyed their positions on various political issues. Furthermore, as self-conscious bearers of truth and leaders of an Islamic reform and revival movement,

---

<sup>84</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, p. 42-47

they found it unjustifiable to remain inactive in the face of what they perceived to be clear threats to Muslim culture and religious identity in the sub-continent, and were driven by a keen sense of accountability before God to participate in politics to the required extent.

Despite their strict adherence to a traditional approach to Islam, and within this approach their shared allegiance to the *Hanafi* legal methodology and Maturidi theology<sup>85</sup>, and their common approach to *Tasawwuf*, in many cases even sharing the same spiritual lineage, the political opinions of the *ulama* of Deoband were far from identical. Perhaps the greatest uniting force among them was their sincere commitment to the preservation of “true” Islam in the face of threat from antagonistic foreign rulers on the one hand, and a corrupted understanding and practice of even the essentials of the religion by its own followers on the other. Their common understanding of the purpose of their work, indeed their lives, and a common spiritual and intellectual training are precisely what caused them to differ with each other on the best means to achieve the desired end, and they considered it their duty to God and their fellow Muslims to promote their own opinion and denounce the opinion of their fellow *ulama* if they considered their own position more conducive to their common goals than the stance assumed by their colleagues. Their difference of opinion was perfectly legitimate in their capacities as *fuqaha*, as elaborators of the *Shari'a*. As a result, from among the elders of Deoband were *ulama* who participated

---

<sup>85</sup> *Sunni* Muslims generally follow either the *Ash'ari* or *Maturidi* schools of theology, which agree on the vast majority of theological issues, with minor disagreements on certain points of belief. Historically, *Ash'ari* beliefs have been more closely affiliated with the *Shafi'i* school of legal thought, while *Maturidi* theology has been more closely affiliated with the *Hanafi* school of thought. As *Hanafis*, the Deobandis adhere to the *Maturidi* school of theology.

actively in the resistance against the British, suffering persecution and incarceration for their activism, and others who questioned the wisdom, even legitimacy, of such confrontation. Some scholars in this group opposed the cause of a separate nation-state for the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent, pushing instead the agenda of United Nationalism, while others were highly critical of this stance and supported the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan.

More than the actual positions that they took, which were merely responses to particular situations and cannot be essentialized as models of political behavior, the very fact that they differed with each other, and the basis of their disagreement, are highly instructive in formulating a theoretical framework for politics within the traditionalist paradigm.

CHAPTER FOUR  
SALIENT FEATURES OF TRADITIONALIST POLITICAL  
THOUGHT

POLITICS AS THE MEANS TO NON-POLITICAL ENDS

Perhaps the most important feature of traditionalist Islamic political thought is that politics from this perspective is no more than a means for the achievement of non-political ends. Hence, while the goal of politics is indisputable, universal and timeless, not only is difference of opinion over its form acceptable, even desirable, but political engagement is completely dispensable when it ceases to serve as the best means to achieve the desired end. Furthermore, just like other disagreements in the non-fundamentals of the religion, the parameters of this debate are defined by the *Shari'a*. Any political agenda, process, structure, form of resistance etc. is unacceptable if it conflicts with the *Shari'a* in any way; the end does not justify the means. The disagreement between the *ulama* of Deoband who advocated non-cooperation and united nationalism, led by *Maulanas* Mahmood Hasan and Husain Ahmed Madani, and of those *ulama* that opposed their stance, led by *Maulanas* Ashraf Ali Thanvi, Shabbir Ahmad Uthmani, and Zafar Ahmad Uthmani, reveals this definitive feature of traditionalist Islamic political thought. While it may seem obvious that politics is a means and not the end, it is a significant departure from the actual political agendas and strategies of modernist and Islamist political thinkers and

activists, even if their rhetoric claims otherwise, and many other important aspects of traditionalist Islamic political thought stem from this basic premise.

The non-political end of politics within the traditionalist paradigm is no different from the overall and ultimate purpose of human life on earth specified in the Quran and *hadith*; engagement in politics is a facet of this worldly existence and like every aspect of a believer's life on earth it too is geared towards the achievement of the purpose for which every human being was created. This purpose is the attainment of Divine pleasure through submission to God's will as enshrined in the *Shari'a*, emulation of the Prophetic example, and establishment of acts of worship, which results in the cultivation of a deep connection with Him in this world, and admission into Paradise in the Hereafter. Politics is merely a tool for the attainment of this goal, and where it ceases to facilitate this end, it is no longer 'Islamic,' even though it may be given this title.<sup>86</sup> In one of his works *Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi* expresses this view of the end of politics and quotes the following verse from the Quran in support of his stance, "(They are) those who, if We establish their reign in the land, establish regular prayer and give regular charity, enjoin the right and forbid wrong; with God rests the end (and decision) of (all) affairs."<sup>87</sup>

One of the leading contemporary Deobandi *ulama*, *Mufti Taqi Uthmani* discusses the common misunderstanding about the place of politics in Islam by Muslim thinkers today in a treatise elaborating on the political thought of *Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi*. While Islam, being a complete code of life, presents many rulings concerning politics, and a believer must accept and act on those principles just as

---

<sup>86</sup> Justice Muhammad Taqi Uthmani, *Hakeem-ul-Ummat Kay Siyasi Afkar/Political Thoughts of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi*, p. 27-29

<sup>87</sup> The Holy Quran, chapter 22, verse 41

much as on other divine proclamations, considering politics to be the goal set by Islam would be as ridiculous as to suggest that business transactions, about which the *Shari'a* also sets very specific conditions, is the end of Islam. *Mufti* Taqi laments the fact that many Muslim thinkers and writers have gone to the extreme in their opposition to secularism, and have understood and declared the acquisition of political power and the effecting of political reform to be the goal of Islam; instead of 'Islamizing politics', they have 'politicized Islam'. In doing so, they have reversed the order of priorities, and relegated even acts of worship and divine injunctions to the status of mere means towards the attainment of political ends; this is particularly dangerous because means can be altered or compromised to facilitate the achievement of the goal.<sup>88</sup>

*Mufti* Taqi and *Maulana* Thanvi's concern about the reordering of priorities appear confirmed when one looks at the writings of the highly influential Islamist thinker mentioned earlier as a strong opponent of *Maulana* Husain Ahmed Madani's position, Syed Abul A'la Mawdudi. He considered the attainment of political control and the establishment of an Islamic political order as the ultimate form of worship, with acts of worship such as prayer, fasting, and the remembrance of God, as methods of discipline and training. He says about the goal of Islam:

"Islam wants the whole earth and does not content itself with only a part thereof. It wants and requires the entire inhabited world. It does not want this in order that one nation dominates the earth and monopolizes its sources of wealth, after having taken them away from one or more other nations. No, Islam wants and requires the earth in order that the human race altogether can enjoy the concept and practical program of human happiness, by means of which God has honored Islam and put it above the other religions and laws. In order to

---

<sup>88</sup> Justice Muhammad Taqi Uthmani, *Hakeem-ul-Ummat Kay Siyasi Afkar/Political Thoughts of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi*, p. 24-26

realize this lofty desire, Islam wants to employ all forces and means that can be employed for bringing about a universal all-embracing revolution. It will spare no efforts for the achievement of this supreme objective. This far-reaching struggle that continuously exhausts all forces and this employment of all possible means are called *jihad*.”<sup>89</sup>

And:

“Islam is a revolutionary doctrine and system that overturns governments. It seeks to overturn the whole universal social order...and establish its structure anew...Islam seeks the world. It is not satisfied by a piece of land but demands the whole universe...Islamic *jihad* is at the same time offensive and defensive...The Islamic party does not hesitate to utilize the means of war to implement its goal.”<sup>90</sup>

He says about the role of acts of worship in attaining this revolutionary objective:

“This is the reality of that worship which people regard as merely prayer, fasting and *dhikr* (remembrance of God), and which they believe have no relationship with worldly matters, whereas in reality prayer, fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage, and the remembrance of God are exercises to prepare one for the main act of worship.”<sup>91</sup>

From the traditionalist perspective, since attainment of the pleasure of God through obedience to the Divine Will is the goal of politics, going against the Divine Will through compromise on the *Shari'a* in the means employed to attain that goal is self-defeating. Just like in other differences of opinion between people of knowledge the debates are circumscribed by what is indisputable in the *Shari'a*, so also are disagreements in the realm of politics thus constrained. *Maulana* Thanvi's criticism of the Non-Cooperation Movement on the grounds that enforcement of a boycott of

---

<sup>89</sup> Quoted by Rudolph Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, p. 128

<sup>90</sup> Quoted by Yvonne Haddad, *Islamists and the Challenge of Pluralism*, p. 10

<sup>91</sup> Quoted by Maulana Muhammad Yousuf Ludhianvi in *Ikhtilaf-e-Ummat aur Sirat-e-Mustaqeem/Differences in the Ummah and the Straight Path*, translated by Mufti Afzal Hoosen Ilias, p. 170

foreign goods runs counter to the *Shari'a* reflects his deep concern with upholding the Sacred Law; even the slightest compromise on the *Shari'a* was unacceptable.<sup>92</sup>

*Maulana* Madani, despite his active engagement in power politics till the creation of Pakistan, was equally persuaded of the status of politics as a means, and not as an end in itself. He was convinced that under foreign rule the ability of Muslims to live their lives in accordance with the Will of God was at stake and participation in politics, and his particular choice of strategies, was the only way to oust the foreign rulers and ensure that the Muslims of India could fulfill their *raison d'être*. After the creation of Pakistan and the departure of the British from India, however, *Maulana* Madani decided that continued participation in politics was no longer the best way to achieve the ultimate objective that had all along been guiding his action; that the preservation of the religion and its establishment in the lives of individual believers and the Muslim community as a whole could be better served through educational activities. *Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind* under *Maulana* Madani renounced any further involvement in political activity as it had now been “absolved of the responsibility that it had per force assumed” and declared that it would now confine itself to work in the religious, cultural, and educational spheres, this being its “final resolve.”<sup>93</sup> Before him, his predecessor *Maulana* Mahmood Hasan had also dramatically changed strategies upon his return to India from Malta in recognition of changed circumstances. He realized that to pursue with his previous plans of armed insurrection against the British would be suicidal, and threw the weight of his support behind the non-violent strategies and Non-Cooperation Movement of Mahatma

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 53

<sup>93</sup> D.R.Goyal, *Maulana Husain Ahmed Madani, a Biographical Study*, p. 235-236

Gandhi, considering it the best strategy under the circumstances to achieve Indian independence.<sup>94</sup>

From the opposite Deobandi camp, *Maulana* Ashraf Ali Thanvi went against his initial stance of staying away from organizations run by irreligious Muslims and lent support to the Muslim League with the intention of influencing the party most likely to be in power in the newly-formed Pakistan, creation of which was at that point imminent. His student *Maulana* Shabbir Ahmad Uthmani, who continued to participate actively in Pakistani politics after the partition of India, said while addressing the first Constitutional Assembly of the country:

“You feel threatened by the *mulla*<sup>95</sup> that he might gain power. But please understand that the *mulla* has no such intention. The *mulla* does not desire power; however, he does wish to make a bit of a *mulla* out of those in power.”<sup>96</sup>

From the traditionalist perspective, Islamists are not only gravely mistaken in making the attainment of political power and the establishment of an ‘Islamic state’ the goal in itself rather than a means to attaining the pleasure of God through His obedience and worship, but also by adopting means that may be unacceptable from the point of view of the *Shari’a*. This is because by reversing the order of priorities, as explained above, they render Divine injunctions, such as those pertaining to acts of worship, both dispensable and alterable; the *Shari’a* may be tampered with while working towards the goal of political power, if that is what it takes. Furthermore, the fundamentalist/Islamist rejection of expert scholarship and a *laissez-faire* approach

---

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p. 80-81

<sup>95</sup> A title for a religious person, usually a person with religious knowledge. However, in the South Asian context the term is used in a derogatory way to refer to a religious person as backward and ignorant.

<sup>96</sup> Justice Muhammad Taqi Uthmani, *Akabar-e-Deoband Kiya Thay?/Who were the Elders of Deoband?*, p. 77

towards interpreting the original sources leaves open room for all kinds of incorrect conclusions, sanctioning strategies, policies, arrangements, etc. that are impermissible from the perspective of the *Shari'a*. Traditionalist *ulama*, for instance, are unanimous in declaring the impermissibility of suicide bombing from the stand-point of the *Shari'a*, but Islamist/fundamentalist enthusiasts argue vehemently for its legitimacy, their reasoning rooted more in political justifications rather than evidence from the Quran and *Sunnah*.

As far as modernists are concerned, while they may not argue for politics as the end in itself, from the traditionalist view-point they are also seriously misguided in the goals towards which they aspire, as well as the political means that they adopt. Inspired by, and more familiar with, secular ideologies than the Quran and *Sunnah*, modernist political thinkers conceptualize the goals of the *Shari'a* very broadly, and advocate the consistency of the goal of politics with liberal definitions of concepts like freedom, equality, justice, and human rights. In writing about Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the highly influential modernist Muslim thinker who founded the Aligarh Movement and its associated Mohammaden Anglo-Oriental College in India around the same time that *Dar-ul-Uloom* Deoband was established, Fuad S. Naeem comments:

“These ideas of progress, rationalism, scientism, and other Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment notions have been among the staple beliefs of modernists, not only in India, but all over the Muslim world. Sayyid Ahmad Khan wanted to demonstrate to the British that Islam was respectable by modern Western standards, a task numerous modernists were to attempt after him, especially Amir Ali, and that Islam was not incompatible with Victorian ideals and values. This notion has often been repeated by modernists who present modern

Western values as Islamic values that the Islamic world has forgotten.”<sup>97</sup>

Since the Quran and *Sunnah* serve as the ultimate reference points for all claims to legitimacy and cannot be sidestepped, Muslim modernists call for “opening of the doors of *ijtihad*,<sup>98</sup>” which is understood as independent thinking, and for a broadening of the scope of interpretation. From the traditionalist perspective, just as in the case of Islamists/fundamentalists, the interpretive exercise by laypersons and university-educated intellectuals rather than appropriately-trained experts in the relevant Islamic sciences results in the adoption of ends and means that run counter to the *Shari’a*, particularly when the outcome of the process is predetermined.

#### POLITICS AS IJTIHAD

The traditionalist understanding of politics as a means implies that there is room in it for difference of opinion and alteration across time and space. However, these differences are justified only when they arise from sincere efforts by scholars with the requisite training in the Islamic sciences to interpret the Will of God, as contained in the *Shari’a*, for any given circumstance. Wherever the textual sources are clear enough— for instance, where the words are unambiguous and emphatic, and passed down through such a large number of unbroken chains of narration that a conspiracy to fabricate them has to be disregarded as an impossibility— there can be no more debate, and an acceptance of God’s injunctions becomes necessary. Where the sources of *Shari’a* are silent or unclear the aim of interpretation is to approximate

---

<sup>97</sup> Fuad S. Naeem, *A Traditional Islamic Response to the Rise of Modernism*, in *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, edited by Joseph E. B. Lumbard, p. 86

<sup>98</sup> Independent legal reasoning; the effort to extract derivative law from the original sources

as closely as possible the Divine Will, and the exercise of reason is qualified by what is clear in the primary texts. God is the ultimate moral, ethical and legal arbitrator, and human research and analysis, reasoning and discussion, judgment and decision-making, are aimed not at establishing what is most pragmatic or popular, but to bring to light the Will of God to the best of human ability.

It follows that the best decisions, that is, which are the ones that closest approximate the Divine Will as revealed in the sacred texts, can be made not by ordinary people but by specialists, though ordinary people may certainly give their input, especially as local customs (*urf*), and public interest (*maslahah*), are among sources of Islamic law, and the complexity of real-world situations requires that all concerns, interests, and perspectives are brought to the table before a decision that fulfills the Islamic goals of justice, stability, etc. can be made about public matters. However, it is the *ulama* and *mashaikh* alone, who have detailed knowledge of the *Shari'a* and expertise in different branches of the religious sciences as well as the sincerity of intention cultivated through rigorous spiritual training, who can best decide on the outcome that most closely approximates the Will of God in any given matter, after careful consideration of the Sacred Law as well as the concerns of the people, public interest, local custom, etc.

As leaders of Muslim opinion in the sub-continent on the salient political issues of the day, and in promoting alternative standpoints on these issues, the Deobandi scholars were acting in their capacity as *ulama* and *fuqaha*. Their viewpoints were no doubt based on their understanding of the political situation in which the Muslims of India found themselves, as well as on a pragmatic

consideration of available options. However, the framework within which they evaluated the existing situation and decided on the best course of action to follow was that of the *Shari'a*, interpreted through the lens of Hanafi methodology. Since the course of action to adopt was not clearly specified in the *Shari'a*, though there may have been certain clear injunctions pertaining to politics that they felt bound by, it fell in the realm of *fiqh* or derivative law, and there was room for disagreement on its legitimacy, objectives and methods. However, this disagreement was within the juristic tradition to which the *ulama* of Deoband were proud heirs. The positions that the *ulama* took on the various issues took the form of juristic opinions or *fatwas*, mostly issued in response to questions raised by Muslims wanting to follow the religiously correct course of action, or were embedded in *shuruh* (commentaries, sign. *sharh*) of the Quran and *hadith*. Muhammad Qasim Zaman describes commentaries as follows:

“The discursive form of the commentary was, in fact, one of the principle means (the other was the *fatwa*) through which the law was not only elaborated but also expanded and modified to meet the exigencies of changing times. Commentaries allowed scholars to preserve the identity and authority of their school of law, their legal tradition, while simultaneously providing them with the means to make sometimes important adjustments in that tradition.”<sup>99</sup>

The positions taken by *Maulana* Mahmood Hasan and later *Maulana* Husain Ahmed Madani towards the British were based on their understanding as qualified *ulama* trained in the Hanafi jurisprudential tradition of what was required of them Islamically under the given circumstances. When *Maulana* Mahmood Hasan was arrested in the Hijaz following his refusal to sign and lend credence to a *fatwa*

---

<sup>99</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam, Custodians of Change*, p. 38

declaring the Ottomans as infidels, he was interrogated by the authorities; the following is a telling excerpt from this dialogue:

“Question: Why did the *Sharif* of Mecca arrest you?

Answer: Because I refused to sign and endorse his *fatwa* (edict).

Question: Why didn't you endorse it?

Answer: Because it was against the *Shari'a*.

Question: Was the *fatwa* of Abdul Haq Haqqani placed before you in India?

Answer: Yes.

Question: What did you do with the copy of the *fatwa*?

Answer: I threw it away.

Question: Why?

Answer: Because it was against the *Shari'a*.”<sup>100</sup>

*Maulana* Mahmood Hasan's famous *fatwa* on participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement legitimized this form of resistance from the perspective of the *Shari'a*. On the other hand *Maulana* Ashraf Ali Thanvi's criticism of a boycott of foreign goods also stemmed from his desire to ensure that the *Shari'a* was in no way violated. Such difference of opinion is perfectly legitimate in the realm of *fiqh*, as it stemmed from different assessments of the same situation and a different ordering of priorities where an order was not specified in the *Shari'a*.

As far as the disagreement on the partition of India is concerned, the viewpoints of both *Maulana* Husain Ahmed Madani and his critic *Maulana* Zafar Ahmad Uthmani were firmly rooted in classical juristic discourses within the Hanafi school of thought. Since the first centuries of Islam, jurists have debated the legal status of Muslim minorities under non-Muslim rule. The Hanafis believed that a territory that had once been part of *Dar-ul-Islam* (the abode of Islam) continued to be so even after it fell into the hands of non-Muslims, as long as Muslims were able to continue practicing their religion there. The presence of Muslims in non-Muslim

---

<sup>100</sup> *Maulana* Syed Mohammad Mian, *The Prisoners of Malta*, p. 51-52

lands may even be beneficial, and at times might even fall into the categories of *mustahab* (recommended) and (*wajib*) obligatory; this may be, for instance, if their continued presence and practice of their faith amidst non-Muslims could become the means of calling people to Islam.<sup>101</sup> This was clearly the reasoning on which *Maulana Madani*'s stance was based when he said:

“Islam comprises the principles that underlie the rectitude of doctrinal, practical, and moral matters. It is the means not only for reforming the individual, but also for the regulation of the collectivity in its particular (household) and general (political) dimensions. It sheds light on all necessities of life, and it provides for all sorts of regulation. We must now consider whether Islam—being constituted of principles regulating individual and collective life, and pertaining to the relations between Creator and the created as well as to relations among the human being themselves—allows, on the basis of shared residence, race, color, and language, a shared nationalism with non-Muslims. [Does it allow a nationalism] whereby to defeat the enemy and to seek and promote common political, economic, commercial, agricultural, and military goals? [Does Islam allow] such extensive interaction as long as there is no threat to its basic principles? To the extent that we have studied the foundational texts of the *Shari'a*, it seems clear to us that, depending on the given situation, [such interaction] is at times obligatory, at other time recommended, at yet others permissible, at others reprehensible, and in certain other circumstances it is forbidden.”<sup>102</sup>

*Maulana Madani*, like other traditional *ulama*, was deeply concerned about the threat that British imperialism posed to the religious and cultural identity of Indian Muslims, and truly believed that only by working together with other religious communities, most significantly the Hindus, could the Muslims of the sub-continent be successful in their struggle against British rule. He considered an appeal to the bonds of shared “residence, color, race, and language” imperative to the achievement of this goal, and viewed calls for the creation of Pakistan as a blow to this struggle

---

<sup>101</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam, Custodians of Change*, p. 36

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, p. 34

and consequently a threat to the preservation of Islam in India. His stance was also premised on the conviction that Muslims as a whole comprise a single global community, which ought not to be divided up into territorial states.

*Maulana* Madani's advocacy of a united nationalism, and his position that to follow such a strategy was not merely permissible but even required for the Muslims of India from the perspective of the *Shari'a*, was based on an optimistic view of the religious and cultural autonomy that Muslims would enjoy in India after the end of British rule. His detractors, both among the Islamists and the Deobandi *ulama*, criticized him for being oblivious to the dangers that a Hindu-dominated India would pose to Muslim religion and culture after the departure of the British; his strategy would defeat the purpose for which it was intended.

This threat to the ability of Muslims to live their lives according to the *Shari'a* and to follow the *Sunnah* of the Prophet in a Hindu-dominated India led *Maulanas* Ashraf Ali Thanvi, Shabbir Ahmad Uthmani, and Zafar Ahmad Uthmani to assume a very different position, also rooted, not coincidentally, in Hanafi law. In his critique of Maulana Madani, embedded in his famous commentary on *hadith*, *Maulana* Uthmani seems to have followed the "territorial concept of law" in the Hanafi *mazhab*, whereby the territorial jurisdiction of the state defined the rights of those inhabiting it, in regarding political autonomy and power as necessary for the preservation of Islamic culture and identity. Muhammad Qasim Zaman suggests that while he does not explicitly say so, *Maulana* Uthmani seems to imply that the world-wide Muslim community offers no guarantee for the survival of the Muslims in an India dominated by Hindus, nor does the existence of Muslim states elsewhere in the

world offer such a guarantee; the only viable way for the future of the Muslim community in the sub-continent to be secure is through having a state of their own.<sup>103</sup>

The political stances advocated by the *ulama* of Deoband thus emerged from the same process of opinion-formation that was employed to answer questions about other private and public aspects of believers' lives, a process that only the *ulama* were considered adequately trained to engage in. About the optimal relationship between the political leadership and the religious/intellectual leadership of the Muslims *Maulana* Thanvi writes that that Prophet Muhammad was both a prophet and a political leader, and the rightly guided caliphs<sup>104</sup> after him embodied both these aspects in their personalities. However, now both these roles have been inherited by different groups, with *ulama* being the heirs of his knowledge and his spiritual and moral qualities, and political leaders taking over the political dimension of his role. The way to bring them together, and hence to become true followers of the Prophetic model, is for Muslim rulers to ensure that no judgment is made without first consulting with, and getting the approval of, the *ulama*, while the *ulama* must lend their support to Muslim leaders who do so, and obey the ruler who rules according to the *Shari'a*. This, according to *Maulana* Thanvi, is the only way to ensure the welfare of the Muslims.<sup>105</sup>

This guidance of the *ulama* is a critical feature of the traditionalist approach to Islamic political thought and makes it much different from the

---

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p. 48-49

<sup>104</sup> The first four caliphs after the death of the Prophet, who were also among his closest companions, are referred to as the *khulafa-e-rashideen*, the rightly-guided caliphs; they were Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali.

<sup>105</sup> Justice Muhammad Taqi Uthmani, *Hakeem-ul-Ummat Kay Siyasi Afkar/Political Thoughts of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi*, p. 48-49

Islamist/fundamentalist and the modernist approaches, which reject the monopoly of religious scholars on the interpretation of the Quran and *hadith* and the issuing of religious edicts derived from the *Shari'a*. It also makes the traditionalist approach very different from Western political philosophies and ideologies such as theories of democracy, which aim to break the monopoly of specialists over public affairs and vest the authority to deliberate and make decisions in the hands of ordinary men and women, the rule of the majority being decisive in the case of liberal democracy.

In the traditionalist paradigm, however, it is not the number of men and women that determines if their decisions are worth following, for indeed the majority of people follow their own desires and are not only themselves misguided but likely to lead others astray. Rather, it is the weight of the individuals making the decisions that matters, and a person of religious knowledge and piety is weightier than all the ignorant and corrupt individuals in the world put together. *Shura* (mutual consultation), which is promoted by modernists and Western interests alike as a democratic, or democracy-compatible, concept indigenous to Islam, is not an open-ended process of consultation among laypersons, and is certainly not a mechanism to arrive at the will of the majority. Rather, it is a careful and conscientious consideration of all sides of the story by experts who best understand the will of God revealed in the Quran and through His Messenger, who will then decide on the course of action that best meets the standards set therein.

## THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF POLITICS

From the traditionalist perspective, a correct understanding of the goals and methods of Islamically legitimate political activity is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for fruitful engagement in politics. According to *Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi*, since the ultimate purpose of Islamic politics is the attainment of the pleasure of God, Muslims engaging in politics must individually and collectively be sincere in their intention. They must defeat the enemy and acquire power motivated purely by the desire to please God and serve His cause; their intention must not be corrupted even slightly by the desire to prove themselves to others and be praised by them, to satisfy their own egos, or to acquire power, wealth, honor, etc. for this-worldly benefit.

A much celebrated example of this paradigm is that of the famous companion and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, Ali, who went on to become the fourth of the 'rightly-guided' Muslim caliphs. Ali was on the verge of killing a rival in face-to-face combat on the battlefield when his opponent, as a last act of defiance, spat at him. Despite the opportunity to kill him, Ali immediately let him go and moved away from him. His bewildered opponent asked why he had been let go and Ali explained that until the time that the man had spat at him his intention in killing him as an enemy of God in a time of war was pure for the sake of God. However, by spitting at him the man had caused him to feel humiliation and anger, and now if he had proceeded to kill him he would have done so at least in part to avenge his ego and in a state of anger, and he did not want to proceed with his intention thus corrupted<sup>106</sup>.

---

<sup>106</sup> Justice Muhammad Taqi Uthmani, *Hakeem-ul-Ummat Kay Siyasi Afkar/Political Thoughts of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi*, p. 55

*Maulana* Thanvi turns to the Prophetic model and the example of the first community of Muslims to find further evidence for his understanding of the prerequisite for political engagement. Out of the 23 years in which the Prophet preached his message<sup>107</sup>, during the first 13 years spent in Mecca the Muslim community was not given permission to fight their infidel oppressors despite relentless persecution, and were commanded to bear the persecution with patience. It is commonly understood that this restriction was imposed on the young Muslim community because of their paucity of resources and material weakness. This view, according to *Maulana* Thanvi, is incorrect. After the migration to Medina the Muslims were allowed to fight to defend themselves even though the resources available to them did not increase by much; the Muslim army in the first battle with the Meccans after migration was severely disadvantaged in material terms, though they still emerged successful from the combat with the help of God.

The real reason for prohibiting the early Muslims from retaliating was to allow time and provide the opportunity to train their egos; to crush their pride, develop self-control and patience, learn reliance upon God, purify their hearts and develop their souls. The migration to Medina completed their detachment from their worldly possessions and relationships, which they had to leave behind for the sake of God, and perfected their love for God. The Muslims already in Medina welcomed their fellow-believers with open arms and happily shared their wealth with them; their

---

<sup>107</sup> Prophet Muhammad was born in 570 CE, is said to have received the first revelation in 610 CE at the age of 40, which is when his mission began, and died 23 years later in 632 CE. The First 13 of those 23 years were spent in Mecca, until the Muslim community was granted permission to migrate to Medina. The migration to Medina marks the beginning of the Islamic lunar calendar.

sincerity and conduct was perfected, the *tazkiya* of their *nafs*<sup>108</sup> complete, with this act. Now when the Muslim community was finally given permission to adopt political means to achieve their objective—permission to establish a political community in Medina, fight wars, build alliances, enter into treaties, send and receive diplomatic delegations, etc.—it was because they had finally developed the sincerity, commitment to God, and other characteristics that were needed before politics could be engaged in fruitfully, in a manner that allowed it to become an effective means to its divinely-ordained end.

*Mufti* Taqi concludes from *Maulana* Thanvi’s analysis that the reason for the current weakness of the Muslims and the ineffectiveness of their political endeavors is because they have skipped over the Meccan phase of struggling against and conquering their own selves, and jumped straight to the Medinan phase, attempting to fight against and over-power the enemy. They are not prepared for this task, and their efforts are for that reason not merely futile, but counter-productive.<sup>109</sup>

*Maulana* Husain Ahmed Madani expressed similar understanding of the conditions for the attainment and right use of power in his presidential address at a session of the *Jamiat-e-ulama-e-Hind* held less than a year after the partition of India.

He said:

“Muslims are feeling dejected that they are losing power. They are surprised why it is so when they are still Muslims and wonder whether the holy promises have become dated or the teachings of Islam were not God-given. How I wish Muslims to understand that power has never been treated as the attribute of Islam; rather, right moral conduct has been the precondition for power. If Muslims want the revival of

---

<sup>108</sup> This is the same *Tazkiyat-e-nafs* that is among the most important goals of *Tasawwuf*. *Maulana* Thanvi identifies *tazkiya* of the *nafs* as a necessary prerequisite for fruitful engagement in politics.

<sup>109</sup> Justice Muhammad Taqi Uthmani, *Hakeem-ul-Ummat Kay Siyasi Afkar/Political Thoughts of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi*, p. 53-57

their lost prestige and survival of their dying culture, the primary condition is that they should cultivate good conduct in life in accordance with the conditions followed by the companions of the Prophet and mentioned in *Surah Hijr*<sup>110</sup>.”<sup>111</sup>

Those of the *ulama* of Deoband who participated in politics themselves embodied this ideal of the eradication of the egoistic self and purity of intention that they considered to be preconditions for effective participation in politics. At the peak of their public disagreement with each other, *Maulana* Madani and *Maulana* Thanvi continued to love and respect each other, truly considering each other to be fellow-travelers headed towards the same goal. It is recorded that one day *Maulana* Madani expressed to some fellow teachers at *Dar-ul-Uloom* Deoband the desire to visit *Maulana* Thanvi in his hometown of Thanah Bhawan, for it had been a while since he last saw him. Thereafter he set out for the purpose of this visit with a few colleagues. The train arrived late at night in Thanah Bhawan, and by the time the visitors reached *Maulana* Thanvi’s *khanqah*<sup>112</sup>, its doors had been locked for the night. *Maulana* Madani knew that the *khanqah* followed a strict schedule and did not consider it appropriate to disrupt that timetable, nor did he want to disturb *Maulana* Thanvi at his home this late at night. He preferred to instead sleep with his companions on the hard floor under the open sky in the courtyard outside the door of the *khanqah*.

The next morning when *Maulana* Thanvi walked from his home towards the *khanqah* for the pre-dawn prayer, he saw the men lying outside; upon discovering who they were he was delighted to see them but saddened that they had spent the

---

<sup>110</sup> The name of a chapter of the Quran

<sup>111</sup> D.R.Goyal, *Maulana Husain Ahmed Madani, a Biographical Study*, p. 234

<sup>112</sup> A *khanqah* is an institute where disciples of a particular Sufi master spend time in the company of their teacher and receive spiritual training

night outside in such discomfort. When asked why they had slept in the courtyard, *Maulana* Madani told him that they had not wanted to disrupt the timings of the *khanqah*, to which *Maulana* Thanvi replied that the doors to his home were always open for them. *Maulana* Madani explained that they had not wished to disturb him at home either. The visitors stayed in Thanah Bhawan for a day or two before returning home.<sup>113</sup>

The Islamists/fundamentalists and modernists from this vantage point are not only misguided by rejecting the expertise of the *ulama* in interpreting the *Shari'a*, they are also misled by the demands of their *nafs* and their desire for worldly gains, having rejected the spiritual training imparted by *mashaikh* of *Tasawwuf*, which is the surest, perhaps only, way to attain the purity of intention and selflessness that the traditionalist *ulama* consider as a condition for fruitful engagement in politics. *Maulana* Ashraf Ali Thanvi said about this deficiency in the modernist orientation:

“In the case of our modernists, besides the paucity of knowledge, the pursuit of one’s desires is the thickest veil which conceals the truth from their eyes.”<sup>114</sup>

Since traditional Islam alone offers the recommended mix of comprehensive and deep knowledge of the religious sciences and rigorous spiritual training, only by operating within the traditionalist paradigm is politics a legitimate and effective means to achieving the divinely-ordained purpose of human existence, the purpose for which the teachings of Islam were revealed. Writes Joseph Lumbard in this regard:

“In order for the malaise of the Islamic world to be fully addressed and the radical reform movements to be brought back into the fold of the

---

<sup>113</sup> Justice Muhammad Taqi Uthmani, *Akabar-e-Deoband Kiya Thay?/Who were the Elders of Deoband?*, p. 84-85

<sup>114</sup> Fuad S. Naeem, *A Traditional Islamic Response to the Rise of Modernism, in Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, edited by Joseph E. B. Lumbard, p. 96

Islamic tradition, the *ihsani*<sup>115</sup> intellectual tradition needs to be accorded its proper place in a way of life that is fully and truly Islamic. In applying the principles of Islam to the modern world, while avoiding the passionate rhetorical battles which rage around them, the representatives of this tradition exemplify this saying of Abu Sa'id b. Abi 'l-Khayr: "A [true] man is one who sits and rises among others, sleeps and eats, and interacts with others in the bazaar, buying and selling, who mixes with people, yet for one moment is not forgetful of God in his heart." But such a path is not achieved by focusing upon reform of the world, of Islam, or of one's nation. It is first and foremost a reform of one's self."<sup>116</sup>

The author quotes the famous contemporary Muslim philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who has written in *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*:

"...the real reform of the world begins with the reform of oneself. He who conquers himself conquers the world, and he in whom the renewal of the principles of Islam in their full amplitude has taken place has already taken the most fundamental step toward the "renaissance" of Islam itself, for only he who has become resurrected in the Truth can resurrect and revive the world about him, whatever the extent of that "world" might be according to the Will of Heaven."<sup>117</sup>

The necessity of inner reform at the individual level as a prerequisite for effecting change in the outside world is expressed in this oft-quoted verse of the Quran: "Verily, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves."<sup>118</sup> It is perhaps in recognition of this principle that the *ulama* who founded the Deobandi reform movement focused on popular education in both the legal and spiritual realms, teaching ordinary Muslims the outward *fiqh* as well as encouraging and guiding their spiritual development. This, it was probably hoped, would result in the inner revolution needed before political action could be taken to

---

<sup>115</sup> By this the author means Sufism, because it involves the beautification of one's character and consequently one's actions, the word *ihsan* meaning beauty.

<sup>116</sup> Joseph E. B. Lumbard, *The Decline of Knowledge and the Rise of Ideology, in Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, edited by Joseph E. B. Lumbard, p. 70

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p. 71

<sup>118</sup> Chapter 13, Verse 11 of the Holy Quran

throw off the yoke of British rule and enable the Muslims of the sub-continent to live their lives in accordance with the *Shari'a*, and fulfill their purpose for which they were created. At the height of the political struggle of the Muslims in India, *Maulana* Ashraf Ali Thanvi was approached by a Muslim political activist and offered to be made *Ameer-ul-Momineen*<sup>119</sup> (Leader of the Faithful); he replied:

“The first order that I would issue as the *Ameer-ul-Momineen* would be to stop all kinds of political activity for ten years. In these ten years there would be attempts to rectify Muslims. When this reform has been achieved to a satisfactory extent, then I would give any other commands.”<sup>120</sup>

This inner change also results in bringing about wider social and political change in another way, other than by preparing individuals for rightly guided political action. *Maulana* Thanvi suggests that in a Muslim country where laws are in effect that run counter to the *Shari'a*, if conscientious Muslims consistently refuse to participate in Islamically illegitimate transactions, despite material setbacks, then the government will be forced to make changes in the law. He gives as an example the simultaneous refusal of individuals to put their money in interest-bearing bank accounts, of professionals to work in other than Islamic banks, and of businessmen and women to take on loans on interest, which would eventually cause the non-Islamic interest-based financial system to be replaced by one based on Islamic principles. Such sustained effort requires commitment to the *Shari'a*, an acute sense of accountability before God and concern about one's fate in the Hereafter, and a lack of attachment to worldly possessions so that material losses can be incurred without

---

<sup>119</sup> Title given traditionally to the Caliph of the Muslims

<sup>120</sup> Justice Muhammad Taqi Uthmani, *Akabar-e-Deoband Kiya Thay?/Who were the Elders of Deoband?*, p. 56

remorse; the Will of God must first be actualized in his own self before a believer can take a stand for it in the outside world.<sup>121</sup>

## SUMMARY

The nature of the involvement of the *ulama* of Deoband in the leading political movements of the day and the considerations that led them to take their respective positions vis-à-vis each other reveals three important aspects of traditionalist political thought. First, that politics, as a facet of human life on earth, is a means to achieve the same non-political end towards which all of a believer's life is geared: the attainment of God's pleasure through complete submission to His will as enshrined in the revealed Law and exemplified by the Prophetic example, which leads to attainment of a deep connection with Him in this world, and success in the Hereafter. Although this goal is indisputable, universal and timeless, the way to achieve it is open to debate and change. Indeed, room for change is imperative in the means as the best strategy under one set of circumstances may seriously compromise the goal if adopted in another. In the realm of politics, determination of the effectiveness of political engagement as a means to the desired end and of the particular strategy that would be most expedient is open to debate, not just because of scholarly disagreement about what a particular scriptural injunction implies, but also because of differing assessments of the situation at hand.

Given the end towards which politics is aimed, traditionalists argue that all decisions must be in line with the sacred Law; if the goal is to attain the pleasure of

---

<sup>121</sup> Justice Muhammad Taqi Uthmani, *Hakeem-ul-Ummat Kay Siyasi Afkar/Political Thoughts of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi*, p. 72-73

God through obedience to His Will, one cannot choose a course of action that compromises the *Shari'a*. This necessarily implies that since the people best placed to ensure that the limits set by the *Shari'a* are not transgressed are the *ulama*; just as they issue edicts in response to questions in other realms of a believer's life, such as about the manner of prayer or the method of divorce or the proper way to conduct a business transaction, so also are they best-qualified to guide political leaders, both incumbent and in the opposition, as well as the general public, in the realm of politics. Therefore, in the traditionalist framework, while the *ulama* do not themselves have to participate directly in politics—indeed it may be desirable for them to avoid direct engagement—their authority must be deferred to by all political actors. Sometimes, however, if the costs of abstaining from direct involvement in politics outweigh the benefits, *ulama* may be forced to become players in the political game themselves. *Mufti Taqi Uthmani* says about the political scene in Pakistan immediately after its creation:

“It has always been the policy of the *ulama* to abstain from participation in elections and from positions of power, and if those in power had accepted the joint recommendation of all the *ulama* in the country regarding the implementation of Islamic Law there would have been no need for any religious scholar to participate in politics. But alas this did not happen and afterwards some honorable *ulama* were forced into participation in electoral politics.”<sup>122</sup>

What is supreme is the pleasure and Will of God, and whatever course of action maximizes that goal must be followed.

It also follows that for individual political actors the goal of attaining God's pleasure can only be reached if there is purity of intention behind their involvement in

---

<sup>122</sup> Justice Muhammad Taqi Uthmani, *Akabar-e-Deoband Kiya Thay?/Who were the Elders of Deoband?*, p. 77

politics, otherwise even the most rightly-guided of actions will be useless for their individual salvation. For political actors to have hearts purified of selfishness, greed, arrogance, anger etc. and filled with commitment to God is also necessary for political action to be conducive to its goal since only then can it be ensured that they will not compromise the goal itself or adherence to the *Shari'a* for personal worldly gains or the satisfaction of their egos, and will work according to the political strategies recommended by the *ulama* towards the achievement of their ultimate goal with diligence and devotion. Hence, spiritual training is a prerequisite to fruitful participation in politics from a traditionalist perspective, and a focus on reforming individuals is likely to be a more effective political strategy than a premature plunge into power politics. Seyyed Hossein Nasr says in this regard:

“How often is this simple truth forgotten in the modern world where men want to do good without being good, to reform the world without reforming themselves, to exalt action and belittle contemplation, unaware that without observance of the above hierarchy no action can ever yield completely fruitful results, especially so far as human welfare in its broadest sense is concerned.”<sup>123</sup>

These features of traditionalist Islamic political thought make it significantly different not only from contemporary secular theories of politics but also from the modernist and fundamentalist/Islamist orientations within Islam, which take the means to be the ends or are otherwise mistaken in their determination of the goals of politics, and reject the expertise of the *ulama* as well as the systematic purification of the self through the Islamic science of *Tasawwuf*.

---

<sup>123</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, p. 104

## CONCLUSION

From the traditionalist perspective, individual and collective action in every realm of human life must be geared towards, indeed is an opportunity to fulfill, the purpose for which God created human life on Earth—the attainment of His pleasure through compliance with His Will. For traditional Muslims, the *Shari'a*, the Sacred Law of Islam, represents the concrete embodiment of the Divine Will and to practice Islam means to follow the *Shari'a*. This Law has its roots in the Quran and the *Sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad and is immutable in its principles, yet is “a growing reality like a tree whose roots are firmly sunk in the earth, while its branches grow from season to season.”<sup>124</sup> It is the *ulama* and *mashaikh*, linked through an uninterrupted chain of knowledgeable and pious individuals to the men and women around the Prophet and through them to their teacher and spiritual guide Prophet Muhammad himself, who are best able not only to identify the immutable principles of the *Shari'a*, but to derive guidance from them for every situation in which believers may find themselves, from the very mundane to the most extraordinary. Politics from this angle is no different than other aspects of human life, neither in being a means to the divinely-ordained end, nor in its rootedness in the *Shari'a*, nor indeed in the dependence of political actors on *ulama* and *mashaikh* for legal and moral guidance and spiritual instruction.

The interpretation of the *Shari'a* is a multifaceted yet highly integrated process that requires not just detailed and wide-ranging knowledge, but also a broad

---

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p. 238

vision and penetrating insight, which is why traditionalists are so fearful of allowing the “doors of *ijtihad*” to be opened to laypersons, in particular those whose intentions are suspect. For example, the stringent *hudood*<sup>125</sup> laws which have become highly controversial for their inclusion of capital punishment are from the immutable part of the *Shari'a*. While modernists join western critics in rejecting them as archaic and impediments to the establishment of justice, fundamentalists may implement them indiscriminately and surely compromise the Islamic ideal of *adl*<sup>126</sup>; the understanding of both is highly superficial.

The traditional *ulama*, following the precedent of the companions of the Prophet, have elaborated detailed criteria for the implementation of these laws, which ensure that justice is indeed established. While the *hudood* laws are themselves unchangeable, *fuqaha* have been very cautious in determining when these laws should be applied so that their implementation does not defeat the purpose for which they were intended; contrary to modernist allegations, they have certainly not been oblivious to the fact that in many circumstances the application of these laws could indeed be counter-productive. During his reign, Caliph Umar bin Abdul Khattab, one of the closest companions of Prophet Muhammad and an expert in *fiqh*, himself ordered that the *hudood* laws pertaining to theft be temporarily lifted at a time of severe drought because their implementation under the circumstances would compromise their intended purpose. This was not an instance of admitted failure of the *Shari'a*; rather the *Shari'a* itself, as the totality of beliefs, principles, priorities

---

<sup>125</sup> Punishments expressly in the Quran and *Sunnah*, and (unlike many other punishments) not subject to being mitigated by the ruler or the aggrieved party

<sup>126</sup> Justice

embodying the Divine Will, required that the particular *hudood* laws be lifted in the given situation.

In passing edicts based on the *Shari'a*, the *fuqaha* display sensitivity to local custom, maximize public interest, accept the lesser of two evils, pay attention to the findings of the latest scientific research, keep themselves informed of public opinion, and act in other such “enlightened” ways not at the *expense* of adherence to the Quran and *Sunnah* but *because* of it. Indeed, given the complexity and dynamism of the real world, the Will of God cannot be fully actualized nor the Prophetic example faithfully followed unless the variety of circumstances facing believers, change in these circumstances, and the multiple dimensions of any given situation are kept in consideration. Traditional *ulama* employ sophisticated methodologies for interpretation of the *Shari'a* that take into account a wide range of both timeless and temporal considerations and allow for flexibility and dynamism without compromising on adherence to the Quran and *Sunnah*.

It is because of their limited understanding of the *Shari'a* and lack of tools to interpret it that modernists consider it inadequate to meet contemporary challenges and call for the privatization of religion and secularization of Muslim societies, and the implementation of the seemingly more sound laws, policies, mechanisms and structures emerging from the Western world. However, given that the all-encompassing nature of the *Shari'a* has caused it to permeate every sphere of life in Muslim countries, however selectively its rulings may have been applied and however perverted its interpretation, attempts at secularization and emulation of Western models have heightened the malaise of Muslim societies rather than

ameliorating it and created further disruptions and imbalances. It has also induced reactionary fundamentalist movements which have an equally unsophisticated view of the *Shari'a* and not only fail to offer practicable solutions to existing problems but make the modernist agenda look even more attractive. Seyyed Hossein Nasr assesses this as follows:

“The unity of the Islamic world, however, is now partially broken as never before, not only politically—which had already occurred during the Abbasid period—but even religiously and culturally, by the erosion caused by Westernization, a process which in addition to introducing a totally foreign element into the Islamic world also reflects directly an alien world which itself suffers from the most glaring forms of disunity and contradiction. Numerous works have been written in the West with various degrees of success on modern movements in the Islamic world, but few have considered the effects of the inner contradictions and tensions of Western civilization itself upon the confusion caused in the Islamic world by present-day modernizing elements.”<sup>127</sup>

Referring to the tension between ruling elites who support a secular understanding of the law and favor economic and political institutions based on Western models, and the majority of Muslims for whom drastic departures from the *Shari'a* are unacceptable and just cause for riots, revolt and confrontation as has been seen in Egypt and Algeria, he says:

“This tension, which is a concrete and widespread aspect of the more general confrontation between traditional Islam and modernity, has led in recent decades to activist movements which employ Western political ideologies and methods and yet oppose the West and which have been dubbed as “fundamentalism,” a most unfortunate term that has nevertheless become prevalent....As long as the pressure of modernism and now also post-modernism upon the Islamic world continues and this tension is not resolved within Islamic societies, confrontations to which the world has been witness in recent years will continue.”<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, p. 124

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239

Traditionalist methodology offers balanced resolutions to this tension, avoiding the excesses of modernism on the one hand and fundamentalism on the other, pegging solutions to contemporary problems firmly in tradition while responding to the needs and challenges of the modern world. There is an approach that does not blindly reject modernity but rather engages it, accepting those aspects of it that are not contrary to the *Shari'a* and its goals, indeed embracing elements that are conducive to the attainment of the desired ends. The founders of *Dar-ul-Uloom* Deoband did so in choosing a modern institutional structure for their *madrasah*, and the *ulama* of Deoband did so in the alliances they built, the political tools they adopting, and in supporting the creating of a modern nation-state. However, where an acceptance of modernity threatens identity, which from the traditionalist perspective is defined through linkages with the past, traditionalist *ulama* display a wariness of modernity, modern society being defined by Anthony Giddens as “a society, more technically, a complex of institutions, which unlike any preceding culture lives in the future rather than in the past.”<sup>129</sup>

The traditionalist approach also offers solutions to the social and political problems plaguing the Muslim world in another way. Politics in Muslim countries with few, if any, exceptions is characterized by a deeply-entrenched and self-perpetuating culture of corruption, participation in politics being motivated almost entirely by the desire for wealth and power. Western models of political organization take as a given this motivation of political actors and propose mechanisms and structures designed to rein in impulses like greed and selfishness and minimize the

---

<sup>129</sup> Quoted in Fareeha Khan, *Being Muslim in Pre-Partition India: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Negotiation of Identity and Politics*, p. 1

damage caused by them. The *Shari'a* also acknowledges the need for building preventive mechanisms and checks and balances into the system, for instance when it allocates in advance a specified share of the *zakat*<sup>130</sup> collected in any given year to the *zakat* collectors to reduce their incentive to embezzle funds. However, it does not rely on such measures alone and offers a tried and tested method of individual reform that has since the beginning of Islam purified believing men and women of their negative impulses and infused them with positive states, preparing them to work sincerely towards the divinely-ordained end in accordance with the *Shari'a*, in every sphere of life. Seyyed Hossein Nasr says about the success of the tradition of Islamic spirituality in achieving this particular goal:

“The unitary principle of Islam, however, could not permit this contemplative way to become crystallized as a separate social organization outside the matrix molded by the injunctions of the Divine Law or *Shari'ah*. It had to remain as an inner dimension of that Law and institutionally as an organization integrated into the Islamic social pattern and inseparable from it. As a result, contemplatives of the highest order have often combined their life of contemplation with the most intense forms of activity, and throughout Islamic history outstanding Sufis have been known to be scholars, artists, teachers, and even administrators and rulers. In such cases, the inner contemplative life has intensified and given meaning to their acts rather than in diminishing their efficiency or appropriateness.”<sup>131</sup>

Indeed, believers whose hearts are purged of negative impulses like arrogance, greed, lust for power, selfishness, attachment to the world and filled with love for God and sincere commitment to attaining His pleasure will not be at peace upon witnessing the flagrant violation of the Divine Will around them; they will be forced by their own conscience and their love for God to participate in a process of change in the status quo through whatever legitimate means necessary. It was precisely this

---

<sup>130</sup> Islamic alms-tax paid annually on one's accumulated wealth

<sup>131</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, p. 109

commitment to God and His Will as enshrined in the *Shari'a* that compelled the *ulama* of Deoband to participate in politics, even though they may have, as in the case of *Maulana* Ashraf Ali Thanvi, initially advised against it, and to even adopt positions in opposition to each other.

From the traditionalist perspective, politics is not merely limited to the here and now. It is, in fact, intimately linked to the transcendent Reality which is both the Source and the End of human life in its entirety, politics being but one facet of the whole. While academics, both Muslim and non-Muslim, who have attempted to study Islamic political thought have not paid attention to the sacred element of politics and the spiritual dimension of political activity, this has been at the expense of ignoring the traditionalist framework. The *ulama* of Deoband operationalized this framework and in doing so demonstrated the viability of the traditionalist approach to politics in the modern world.

## GLOSSARY<sup>132</sup>

*Ahl-as-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah*: "People of the Way (of the Prophet) and the community (of His companions)," also referred to as *Sunnis*; that majority of Muslims which accept the authority of the whole first generation of Muslims and the validity of the historical community, in contrast with factions like the *Kharijis* and the *Shi'ah*. Those professing adherence to the *Sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad and to the agreed upon norms and practices of the universal Muslim community

*Ahl-e-Hadith*: "The people (or, partisans) of *hadith*. The *Ahl-e-Hadith*, who emerged in late-nineteenth century colonial India, denied the authority of all *Sunni* schools of law and insisted rather on the exclusive and unmediated authority of the Quran and *hadith* and the sources of all guidance.

*Alim* (pl. *Ulama*): A learned man, in particular one formally trained in the religious sciences, especially but not exclusively in Islamic law and *hadith*

*Dars-e-Nizami*: A syllabus of religious education current in South Asia from the eighteenth century

*Dar-ul-Islam*: lands under Muslim rule; later, any lands in which Muslim institutions are maintained, whether or not under Muslim rule. It is the converse of *Dar-ul-Harb*, the "lands of wars"

*Dar-ul-Uloom*: A place of advanced religious learning, superior to a *madrassah*

*Fatwa*: A legal opinion issued by a jurisconsult (*mufti*) on a point of law

*Fiqh*: Islamic law and jurisprudence; the discipline of elucidating the *Shari'a*; also the resultant body of rules

*Faqih* (pl. *Fuqaha*): An expert in *fiqh*; a scholar of Islamic law

*Hadith*: The sayings of the Prophet Muhammad based on the authority of a chain of transmitters, regarded by Muslims as second to the Quran as a source of religious law and guidance

---

<sup>132</sup> Adapted from the glossaries in Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, p. 361-368, and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam, Custodians of Change*, p. 259-262

*Haji*: One who has performed the *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca that is obligatory upon every able-bodied and financially capable Muslim man and woman once in a lifetime

*Hanafi*: Referring to the *Sunni* legal *mazhab* ascribed to Abu Hanifa (699-767 CE); most Sunni Muslims in South Asia belong to this school of law.

*Hazrat*: Presence, dignity, a title applied to any great person

*Hudood* (sig. *hadd*): Punishments expressly in the Quran and *Sunnah*, and (unlike many other punishments) not subject to being mitigated by the ruler or the aggrieved party

*Ijazah*: Permission; formal authorization to transmit a particular religious text or religious learning in general

*Ijtihad*: Systematic reflection on the foundational sources of the law to arrive at legal rulings on matters not already or explicitly determined by sacred Law by a *mujtahid*, a person qualified for the inquiry.

*Isnad*: Chain of transmission

*Khanqah*: A space for Sufi activities, whose resident engage in meditative practices and the remembrance of God, and where one or more Sufi masters live and teach their disciples.

*Madrassah*: A school for *ulama*; an institute of religious learning

*Manqulat*: the “copied” subjects, Quran and *hadith*, as distinguished from *ma’qulat*, which are the products of man reasoning.

*Ma’qulat*: See *manqulat* above

*Maulana*: “Our Protector,” a title given to a person respected for religious learning

*Mazhab*: In *Sunni* Law, one of the four equally legitimate schools of law: Hanafi, Hanbali, Shafi’i, and Maliki

*Milla*: A community as defined by ties of faith

*Mufti*: An expert in the science of giving Islamic legal verdicts

*Naqshbandi*: The Sufi path of those initiated into the chain of succession of Baha’uddin Naqshband, tracing back to Prophet Muhammad through his closest companion and the first Muslim caliph after his death, Abu Bakr

*Qadi*: A state-appointed Muslim judge who rules according to the *Shari’a*

*Qawm*: Nation as defined by ties of ethnicity, shared territory, and language

*Salik*: A traveler on the spiritual path

*Sanad*: A diploma, testimonial, certificate

*Shaikh* (pl. *mashaikh*): A title for a Sufi master

*Sharh* (pl. *Shuruh*): A commentary on a religious text

*Shari'a*: the whole body of rules guiding the life of a Muslim, in law, ethics, and etiquette; sometimes called sacred Law. The provisions of the *Shari'a* are worked out through the discipline of *fiqh* on the basis of *usul-ul-fiqh* (principles or sources of *fiqh*).

*Sufi*: A Muslim mystic

*Sunnah*: The way of Prophet Muhammad, his normative example. It includes his actions and sayings and his tacit approval on the actions or sayings of another, and encompasses both his external acts and his internal states.

*Sunni*: See *Ahl-as-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah*

*Taqlid*: Adherence to the legal rulings of earlier scholars, or of the school of law to which one professes adherence

*Tasawwuf*: See Sufi; the traditional Islamic science of the purification of the heart and soul, the commonest term for that aspect of Islam which cultivates spiritual development

*Tazkiyat-e-nafs*: Purification of the Self; a central goal of Islamic spirituality

*Ulama*: see *alim*

*Ummah*: The worldwide community of Muslims

*Wahabi*: An adherent of the puritanical teachings of the eighteenth-century Arab reformer Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab (d. 1791)

*Zakat*: Islamic alms-tax paid annually on one's accumulated wealth; one of the five "pillars" of the faith

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1) Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam, Custodians of Change*, Princeton University press, 2002
- 2) Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, Princeton University Press, 1982
- 3) Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Contestations, Essays on Muslims in India and Pakistan*, Oxford University press, 2004
- 4) Joseph E. B. Lumbard (editor), *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, World Wisdom Inc., 2004
- 5) William A. Graham, *Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation*, Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 23/3 (1993)
- 6) M. Burhanuddin Qasmi, *Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband, A Historic Struggle against British Tyranny*, Markaz-ul-Ma'arif India, 2001
- 7) Fareeha Khan, *Being Muslim in Pre-Partition India: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Negotiation of Identity and Politics*, unpublished
- 8) Justice Muhammad Taqi Uthmani, *Hakeem-ul-Ummat Kay Siyasi Afkar/Political Thoughts of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi*, Maktaba al-Ashrafia, Pakistan
- 9) Justice Muhammad Taqi Uthmani, *Akabar-e-Deoband Kiya Thay?/Who were the Elders of Deoband?*, Idarat-ul-Ma'arif, Karachi, Pakistan, 2000
- 10) D.R.Goyal, *Maulana Husain Ahmed Madani, a Biographical Study*, Anamika Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd. For Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, India, 2004
- 11) *Maulana Syed Mohammad Mian, The Prisoners of Malta*, Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd., India, 2005
- 12) Ahmad Hasan, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan, 1993

- 13) Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhalwi, *The Differences of the Imams*, White Thread Press, 2004
- 14) Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, ABC International Group, 2001
- 15) Abdul Hakim Murad, *Understanding the Four Madhhabs*,  
<http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/newmadhh.htm>
- 16) Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *Why Muslims Follow Madhhabs*,  
<http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/madhhabstlk.htm>
- 17) Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *The Place of Tasawwuf in Traditional Islam*,  
<http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/sufitlk.htm>

